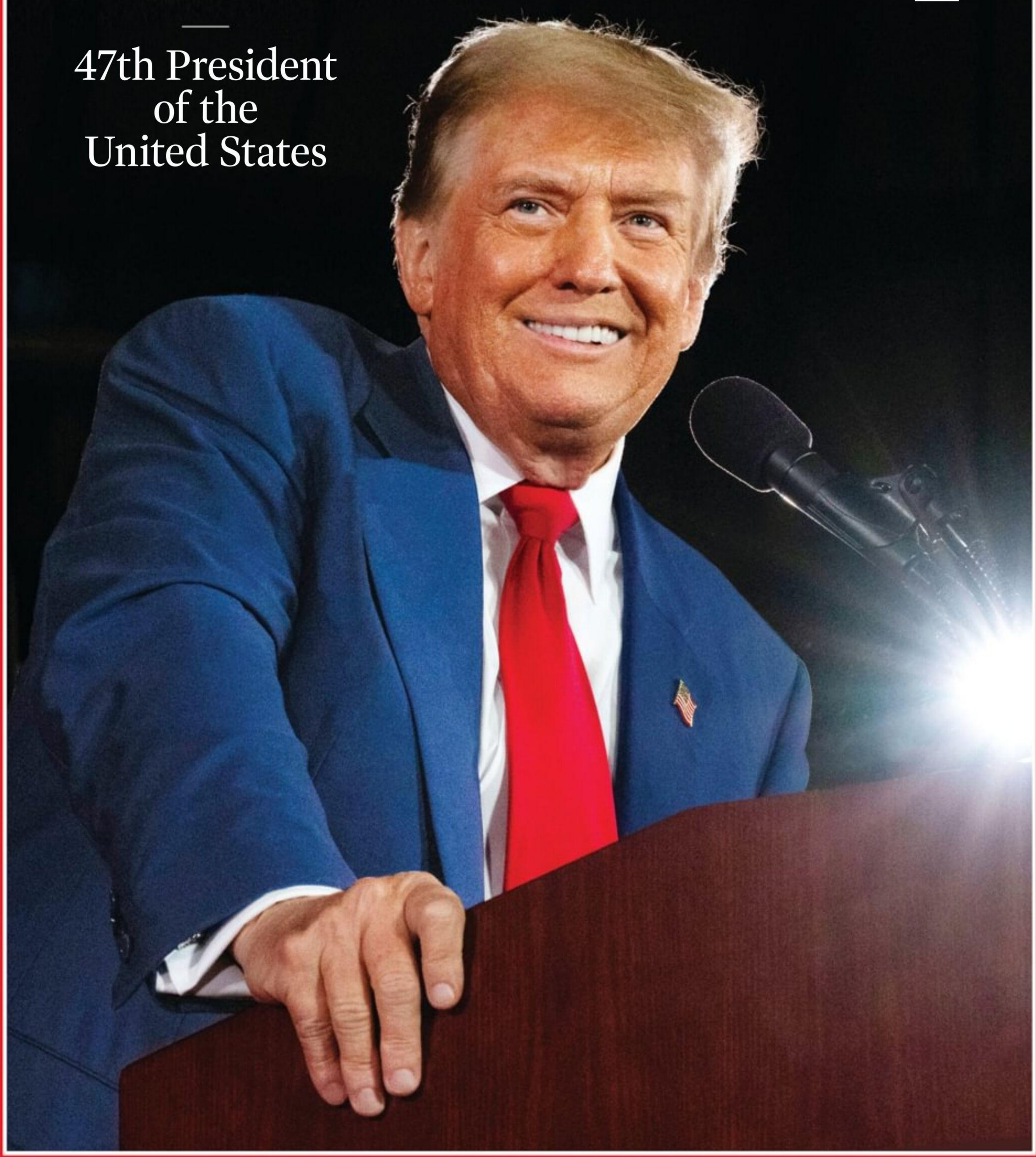
SPECIAL TIME EDITION

Donald Trump

47th President of the United States



TIME

COMMEMORATIVE EDITION

DONALD TRUMP

Donald Trump arrived for a campaign event in Waco, Texas, on March 25.

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Trump returned to Butler, Pennsylvania, on October 5 for a dramatic campaign stop at the site of his July 13 assassination attempt.

HOW TRUMP WON

He returned to the White House with a campaign that emphasized immigration and the economy and delivered major gains across demographics.

BY ERIC CORTELLESSA

IT WAS THE MOMENT HE HAD FANTASIZED about for four years. At 2:24 a.m. on November 6, Donald Trump strutted on stage in a Florida ballroom, surrounded by advisers, party leaders, family and friends. The Associated Press had yet to call the race, but it was clear by then that the voters had swept him back into power. Staring out at a sea of supporters in red MAGA hats, Trump basked in the all but certain triumph. "We've achieved the most incredible political thing," Trump said. "America has given us an unprecedented and powerful mandate."

How Trump, 78, won reelection will be the stuff of history books, and already America's choice can be traced to some key decisions. To Trump's top aides, the thesis of the campaign could be summed up in a simple slogan: "Max out the men and hold the women." That meant emphasizing the economy and immigration, which Trump did relentlessly. It meant diverting attention away from the chaos of his first term, the abortion bans he ushered in and his assault on American democracy four years ago. It meant a campaign that rode the resentment of disenchanted voters and capitalized on the cultural fractures and tribal politics that Trump has long exploited.

Most of all, the outcome can be credited to a singular figure whose return to the White House traced a political arc unlike any in 250 years of American history. Trump left office in 2021 a pariah after inciting a mob of supporters to ransack the U.S. Capitol at the end of an attempt to overturn his electoral defeat. Three years later, he engineered an unprecedented political comeback. Trump effortlessly dispatched his GOP rivals, forced President Joe Biden out of the race and vanquished Vice President Kamala Harris in a dominant victory that exceeded virtually everyone's expectations. Along the way, Trump shrugged off a 34-count felony conviction and an array of other criminal indictments.

The scale of his success was stunning. Trump carried North Carolina, flipped Georgia back to his column and smashed through the Blue Wall. His campaign outperformed its goal of turning out men and holding women. Exit polls showed Trump winning large numbers of Latino men in key battleground states, improving his numbers with that group in Pennsylvania from 27 percent to 42 percent. Nationally, Trump's support among Latino

In his election night speech, Trump claimed "an unprecedented and powerful mandate."

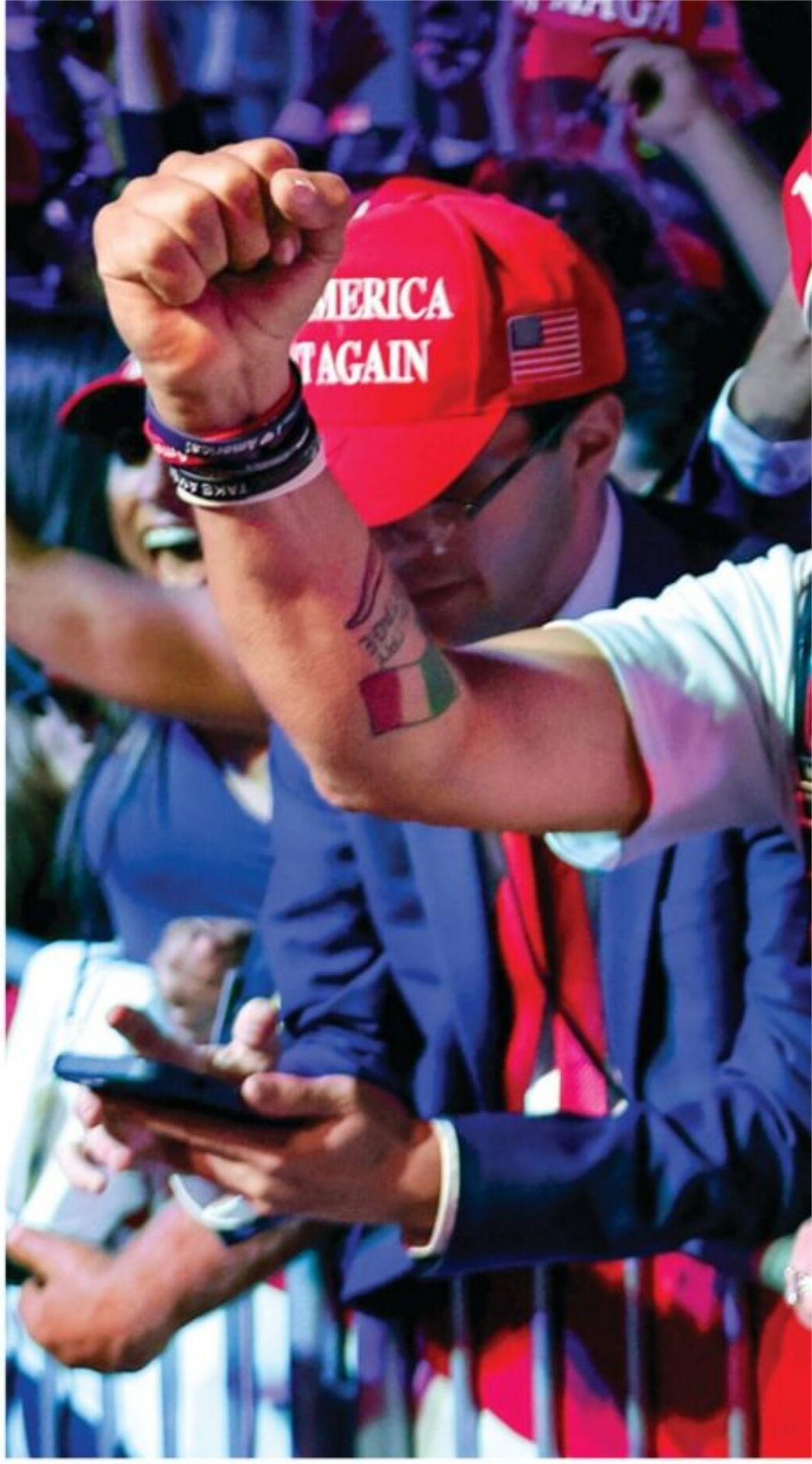
men leaped from 36 percent to 54 percent. Trump also increased his share of voters without a college degree, gained ground with Black voters in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin and held steady nationally with white women, shocking Democrats who had expected a post-Dobbs uprising. Among first-time voters, Trump boosted his support from 32 percent four years ago to a 54 percent majority.

He got his share of big breaks. When Trump launched this campaign on the heels of a third straight rebuke in national elections, Republican leaders tried to ignore him. His primary opponents were too timid to take him on. A combination of friendly judges and legal postponements pushed his most damning criminal trials to after the election. Until July, Trump's general-election opponent was an unpopular incumbent viewed by many as too old to continue in the job. Biden only confirmed those suspicions when he bumbled through their first, and only, debate. The Democrats' hasty replacement of the president with Harris deprived them of a better-tested candidate who could potentially have rallied broader support. Voters took Trump's own advanced age and increasingly incoherent trail rhetoric in stride. Much of the country read Trump's legal woes as part of a larger corrupt conspiracy to deny him, and them, power. And he benefited from a global restiveness in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic that has ousted incumbent leaders around the world.

The consequences may be historic. Trump has dominated American politics for nine years now, and after four years of his tumultuous presidency, punctuated by an insurrection, the country chose to reinstall him. Trump campaigned on an authoritarian agenda that would upend America's democratic norms, and he is already preparing to deliver on it: mass detention and deportations of migrants; revenge against political enemies via the justice system; deploying the military against his own civilians. How far he chooses to go with the power the public has handed him is a question that will shape the fate of the country.

To the MAGA faithful, Trump's victory is a thrilling vision coming into view. For the less fervent supporters who helped put him over the top, his rhetoric is largely bluster in service of reforming a government out of touch with America's economic and social needs. To the rest of the country and much of the world, a second Trump term looks like a blow to democracy in the U.S. and beyond. That split screen will animate American discourse for the next four years. The nation is more polarized than at any point since the Civil War. But soon there will be at least one thing that binds us all together: Come January 20, we will all be living in Trump's America.

The first, and most aggressive, agenda item is expected to be immigration and the border. In an April interview with TIME, Trump said he plans to use executive power to begin mass deportations of undocumented migrants, ordering the National Guard, Immigration and Customs Enforcement and federal law enforcement to conduct raids. Tom Homan, a former Trump official now affiliated with Project 2025, is expected to lead the effort, according to campaign sources.



Supporters in Palm Beach, Florida, showed their joy at the moment Fox News projected that Donald Trump had defeated Kamala Harris and would be returning to the White House.

At the same time, top Trump advisers tell TIME, there will be a massive purge of the federal bureaucracy. The most satisfying part of that to Trump, they say, will be firing Jack Smith, the special counsel prosecuting him on charges of willfully mishandling classified information and conspiring to overthrow the 2020 election.

Trump's most controversial moves are all but certain to face significant legal and political fights. He has vowed to pick an attorney general who will investigate and prosecute his political rivals and critics. Trump will be emboldened by a Supreme Court ruling last summer that granted U.S. presidents potential immunity from some criminal prosecution for official acts. Between Trump's psychological disposition, his vows to seek revenge on his adversaries and the removal of many of the guardrails that hindered him in a first term, scholars of authoritarianism see a nation on the brink of crisis.

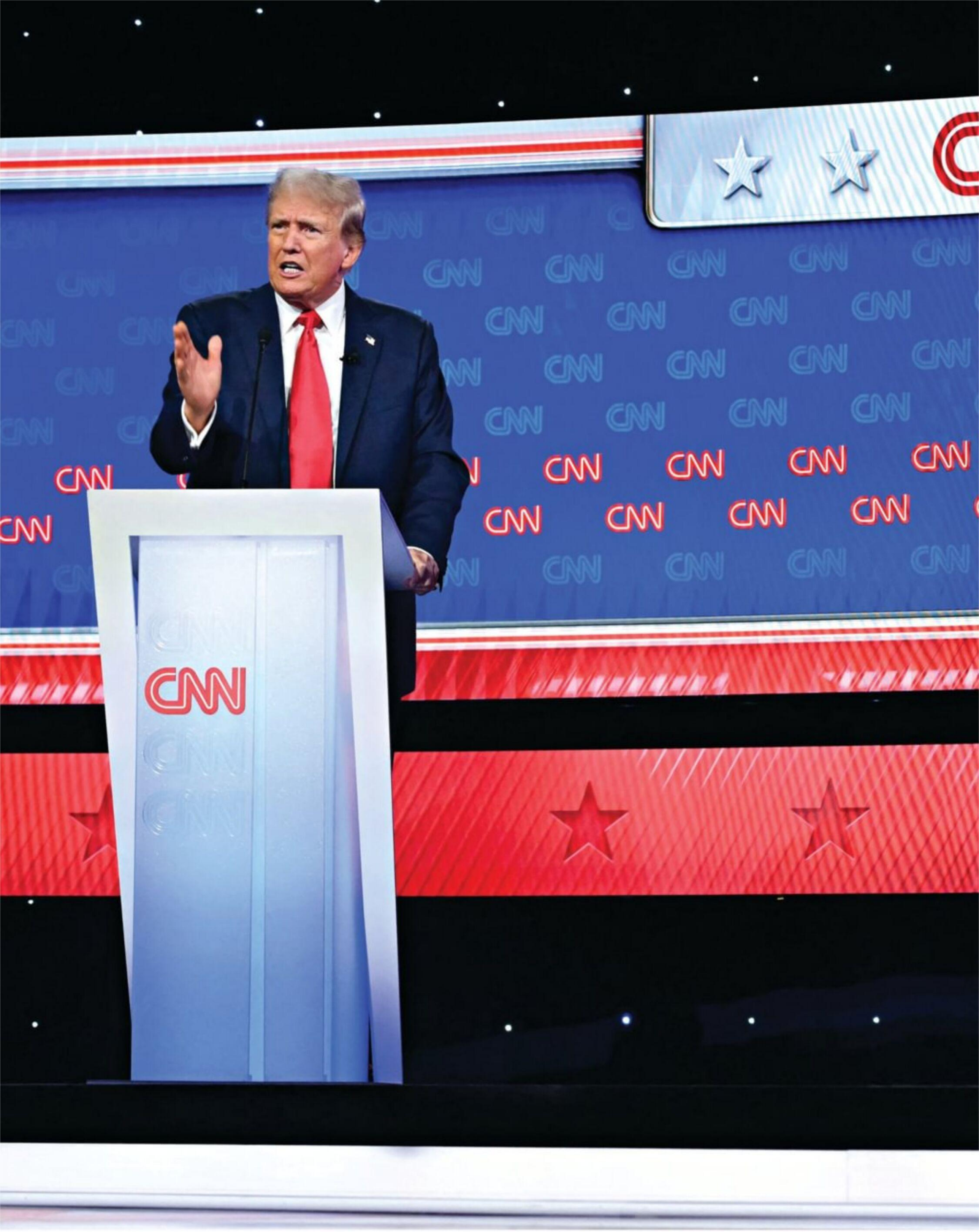
Ultimately, the election is as much a judgment on the American people as it is on the man they have returned to office. Trump's comeback didn't happen randomly. By building a social and political movement that gave him coercive power over the Republican Party, Trump systematically demolished many of the nation's long-standing norms, ushering in a cohort of lackeys who will enable his most autocratic impulses. He will enter his second term committed to creating a governing environment with few restraints on his power. He did not hide any of this. It was what the American people decided they wanted. ▯

ABOVE THE FRAY

Trump dominated primary season despite skipping the debates. Here, he spoke in Rochester, New Hampshire, on January 21, two days before that state's vote.

IMAGES OF A CAMPAIGN

This dramatic election season included two assassination attempts and a stunning change to the Democratic ticket.


CNN

KNOCKOUT BLOW

Joe Biden's performance against Trump in their debate on June 27 was such a disaster that 24 days later the sitting president left the race and endorsed his vice president, Kamala Harris.

UNDER FIRE

At a Trump rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, on July 13 (left), Thomas Matthew Crooks, 20, fired eight rounds from a nearby rooftop before being killed by police. The attack bloodied Trump's ear, killed Corey Comperatore, 50, and left two others wounded. Crooks had been considering many targets, including Joe Biden. On September 15, a second suspected would-be assassin, Ryan Wesley Routh, a 58-year-old former Trump supporter, was found hiding in the shrubs with a rifle at a Florida golf course where Trump was playing. Routh was apprehended before he could attack.

READY TO SERVE

On October 20, the Trump campaign visited a McDonald's in Feasterville, Pennsylvania, that was closed for the morning so the candidate could don an apron, pose for the cameras, make some fries and roast Kamala Harris by stating—without substantiation—that her claim to having spent a summer in college working at the fast food chain was fiction. "Now I have worked at McDonald's," he said. "I've now worked for 15 minutes more than Kamala."

2024 CAMPAIGN

THE ROAD BACK

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Trump vanquished primary opponents, found a running mate and survived a felony conviction to claim his party's nomination once again.

Supporters greeted their favorite candidate as he arrived for a rally in Vandalia, Ohio, on March 16.

OVERCOMING PARTY RIVALS

Looking back, other Republicans seeking the 2024 nomination never really had a chance.

BY MOLLY BALL

THE IOWA VOTER HAD A QUESTION for Ron DeSantis—a plea, of sorts, on behalf of "all the small-town people."

Outsiders "suggest we're the flyover country, the racists, the deplorables, the Walmart shoppers," Jason Summers, a 53-year-old Republican activist, was telling the governor of Florida in the summer of 2023. Presidential candidates, he added, "come around every four years, they kiss our babies, pat us on the head and send us on our way, and then they forget about us." How could the residents of Albia, Iowa—population 3,712—be sure that DeSantis wouldn't abandon them too?

Less than an hour earlier, DeSantis had roared into town juggernaut-style, disembarking from a bus emblazoned with his name, the name of his super PAC, Never Back Down, and trailed by a dozen advisers. Standing in a veterans' wellness center, surrounded by a scrum of media, he readied to field Summers' softball question.

He answered without a flicker of passion. First, he said he'd never accepted the stereotypes about flyover country. Then he pointed out that while people may associate his state with Miami and Central Florida theme parks, it also has "a lot of those types of communities." Small towns are important, DeSantis added, in part because they produce many recruits for the military and law enforcement. "But I do think the clash of, kind of, elites on the coast is, these guys have really strong values here, and they don't always like that," he concluded.

This was the man who was supposed to be the Trump Slayer. Yet as the 2024 campaign lumbered into gear, DeSantis never looked like less of a threat to the former president. Bloodied by a barrage of Trump insults and millions in negative ads from Trump's allies, his campaign had been a litany of disappointment. DeSantis's culture-war message wasn't moving voters; donors fretted that he wasn't ready for prime time; many of the same conservatives who had once crowned him the future of the GOP were already declaring him toast.

It was somehow both early and late in a Republican primary campaign of maximum consequence, the race that would determine whether 2024's election would turn into the sequel that few Americans claimed to want: Biden vs. Trump. Too early, rival campaigns said, for people to start paying attention and making up their minds about a

Ron DeSantis finished a distant second in Iowa and dropped out of the race before the New Hampshire primary, immediately endorsing Trump.

primary season half a year away. And yet it already felt too late for anyone to lay a finger on Trump, whose lead in polls was standing at 30 to 40 points. The front-runner, meanwhile, was sleepwalking through rote speeches, visiting Iowa only a handful of times. Trump was not even planning to show up for the Republican debates. And why would he? He was running away with the thing as rivals floundered and leaped to his defense after each successive criminal indictment. Rather than condemn the actions that led to 91 state and federal charges, DeSantis, like most of the field, bolstered Trump's claims of victimization and vowed to pardon the former president if he were convicted.

Iowa's first-in-the-nation caucuses in January loomed as the best chance to change the race's frozen trajectory. The state had a history of elevating long-shot candidates, and many of the voters present had continuing qualms about Trump. In polls, some 70 percent of potential caucus goers said they were open to a non-Trump candidate. Yet DeSantis had failed to make it the two-man race that many had anticipated, and no one in the rest of the field—a group that included former South Carolina governor Nikki Haley and Trump's own vice president, Mike Pence—was rising to take his place as Trump's chief rival.

IN THE SUMMER OF 2023, IT ALREADY FELT TOO LATE FOR ANYONE TO LAY A FINGER ON TRUMP.

And so the candidates descended on Iowa. The state's Republican voters said they saw America "at a tipping point" and wanted to find a candidate who could win the general election, the longtime Iowa GOP chairman, Jeff Kaufmann, told me. Like everyone else, DeSantis wanted to believe the campaign was about something else—the issues, the current president, the price of tea in China—when it was self-evidently about the singular, binary question that has perplexed the political system for so many years: Could Trump be stopped?

As DeSantis's bus pulled out, I returned to Jason Summers, who was chatting with the town's mayor. I brought up his poignant remark about politicians kissing babies and then forgetting about their promises. Did he feel Trump had done that? Summers thought about the question. "Honestly, I think just the opposite," he said. "One of the strange things about President Trump was that while he didn't have that small-town politeness, he identified with the small-town issues. That hardness that Trump speaks with they looked over because he was actually fighting for them."

A little more than an hour northwest, at a town hall in the Des Moines suburb of Ankeny, a man got up to ask Tim Scott a question. Reading from a notebook, Steve Alexander informed the South Carolina senator that he had a five-pronged test for candidates that he called the "Five P's." On the first three—personality, politics and performance—Scott passed with flying colors. "It boils down to the last two things, promises and policies," Alexander continued. "One thing about Trump, he made promises and he kept 'em where it was possible."

Scott, the only Black Republican in the Senate, helped to design Trump's 2017 tax-cut bill and voted against both his impeachments, but he did not object to the certification of the 2020 election. Scott had centered his campaign message on the idea that his life story put the lie to liberal accusations of a racist society. "Where do I start?" he asked Alexander, grinning.

Longtime Iowa hands insisted the race was far from over, and anti-Trump Republicans pointed to precedent to make the case that Iowans would slow his momentum. In the 2016 election, Trump had cannonballed into the state, ignoring all the rules. He named a former *Apprentice* contestant as state campaign co-chair, brought a helicopter to the Iowa State Fair, and did little of the usual retail politicking. Most experts assumed the thrice-married former Democrat would not appeal to a state partial to humble, churchgoing candidates like the previous two caucus winners, former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee and former Pennsylvania senator Rick Santorum. Trump, meanwhile, built an entirely new kind of coalition. In dying former fac-

Tim Scott (top) never gained traction, while Nikki Haley, who finished third in Iowa, stayed in the race until March 6.

tory towns in Eastern Iowa, he drew crowds of blue-collar voters who'd never be caught dead at an event for more traditional candidate. Many had never caucused or weren't even Republicans.

In several days attending events across the state for numerous candidates, I met many of the voters anti-Trump groups were targeting. They voted for Trump against Biden and Hillary Clinton, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, but were weary of the drama and ready for a fresher face. They liked what they heard from DeSantis, Scott and others, and they felt they had plenty of time to make up their minds. Talking to these earnest, enthusiastic Republicans, the race could indeed feel wide open. But when I asked them who they caucused for in 2016, these voters invariably said Cruz or Rubio, not Trump. For those trying to topple the front-runner, the problem wasn't the voters who were coming out to see them. It was the voters who weren't.

The Lincoln Dinner in late July, attended by more than 1200 Republicans, was a chance for an underdog to make a splash. The 13 candidates on the program ranged from Trump and DeSantis to businessman Perry Johnson and pastor Ryan Binkley. Of the long-shot candidates who needed a figurative lightning strike to put them into contention, only former Texas congressman Will Hurd dared risk the ire of the pro-Trump crowd. "Donald Trump is not running for president to make America great again or represent the people that voted for him," he said. "Donald Trump is running to stay out of prison." Hurd was promptly booed off the stage.

Trump was last to speak. He walked on stage holding a folder with the presidential seal under one arm and proceeded to read his speech in a singsong voice, barely looking up or departing from the script, with the notable exception of a couple of insults directed at "DeSanctus." "I wouldn't take a chance on that one," he muttered, to laughs. When Trump finished, before the allotted 10 minutes were up, the room erupted in a riotous ovation.

The candidates then repaired to "hospitality suites" along the concourse where voters could visit with them one-on-one. It was here that I ran into Chris Sununu, the governor of New Hampshire and a popular anti-Trump Republican. He was optimistic Trump would be vanquished. As a quasi-incumbent, "of course he's going to be way ahead," Sununu said. But, he insisted, "people know he can't win, and they're looking for someone else." (Sununu would end up endorsing Trump in March 2024.)

Inside the convention center, the only suite with a line out the door was the one where Trump stood posing for thumbs-up pictures with fans. Annette Hoover, 75, a retired saleswoman from Indianola, told me she was "Trump all the way."

"He's an a--hole, to be honest, but that's what it takes to deal with the people he deals with," she said. "We've got to get him back. We're in a world of hurt right now." DeSantis, she said, might make a good VP. ▯

—With reporting by Julia Zorthian

Why Trump Chose JD Vance

★★★★★

The author and senator appealed to rust belt voters and Silicon Valley donors, and he had an important fan in Donald Jr.

BY ERIC CORTELLESSA

In selecting Sen. JD Vance of Ohio as his running mate, Donald Trump elevated a leading light of the right-wing populist movement spawned by Trump's rise rather than someone from another faction of the conservative movement. Vance has been a vociferous critic of U.S. aid to Ukraine and other foreign entanglements; a proponent of restrictive immigration policies and an aggressive deportation operation; and a champion of Trump's protectionist trade regime and high tariffs on imported goods. "It's part of the agenda to reindustrialize the country," Vance told me in April.

In other words, Trump chose a MAGA favorite who he believed could shore up rust belt voters in the battleground states of Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania. The senator was also thought to be popular with a subset of Silicon Valley donors who could tap into their vast reservoirs of wealth.

Vance, 40, has an unorthodox biography. As he chronicled in his best-selling 2016 memoir, *Hillbilly Elegy,* he grew up in Ohio surrounded by social and economic decline. After serving in the Marines as a combat correspondent covering the Iraq War, Vance enrolled at the Ohio State University, graduating summa cum laude in political science and philosophy. He then went to Yale Law School and became editor of the *Yale Law Review.*

His path from there hardly resembles the traditional arc of an America First disciple. Vance worked at the elite law firm Sidley Austin—the same one where Barack and Michelle Obama met—and then moved to San Francisco to become a venture capitalist, working with entrepreneur Peter Thiel.

After publishing *Hillbilly Elegy,* Vance was widely seen as a tribune of the working class. The book is infused with a self-styled conservatism that promotes personal responsibility and self-reliance. To critics, it was a disparaging portrait of the deindustrialized heartland that blames the victims for their own downward mobility.

When Trump emerged as a dominant political force, Vance was a vocal opponent and privately wrote to a former law school roommate that Trump might be "America's Hitler." In February 2016, he wrote in a *USA Today* op-ed that "Trump's actual policy proposals, such as they are, range from immoral to absurd."

The origins of Vance's metamorphosis have been a source of endless media speculation. But by the time he became a Senate candidate two years ago, Vance was a full-throated populist nationalist. His tirades against U.S. assistance to help Ukraine to defend itself against Russia's invasion caught the attention of Trump's eldest son, Donald Trump Jr. He soon brought Vance on his popular right-wing podcast, *Triggered,* and the two formed a close friendship. Since then, Trump Jr. has been one of Vance's most important advocates, encouraging his father to endorse Vance for Senate in 2022 and to pick him as his running mate in 2024.

For Trump, Vance combined two profound virtues. His hardscrabble background gave him a genuine connection to the white working-class voters who animate Trump's base and have outsize influence in the election. At the same time, his rebellion against the elites whose circles he once traveled in gave him an apostate's appeal.

Those characteristics distinguished Vance from other top running-mate contenders. North Dakota governor Doug Burgum

Vance spoke in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on July 20, five days after he was added to the ticket.

was seen as a safe choice, well liked by the business community. Virginia governor Glenn Youngkin was another donor-friendly prospect from a state that had gone for Democrats in the last four elections. Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida held the potential to grow the Republican tent and court Hispanic voters. Sen. Tim Scott of South Carolina would have marked a pitch to Black voters and been a popular choice with evangelical Christians.

For his part, Vance was the most ideologically aligned with Trump. Sources familiar with Trump's thinking said the former president was impressed with Vance's television appearances, emphasizing his articulate charisma and ability to think on his feet. The two had also developed a personal relationship in recent years. Trump often called Vance at random to discuss political strategy.

While Vance helped Trump with blue-collar voters in the Midwest, his history of opposing abortion access was seen as a potential liability with suburban women. As the campaign proceeded, he adopted Trump's position that abortion should be a states-rights issue. "I think states largely should figure out the abortion question themselves," Vance told me, but he didn't rule out some restrictions. "I think it's reasonable for the federal government to set some minimum standard and then let the states figure out 90 percent of abortion policy from there."

Vance was the most aggressive of the contenders for running mate. Hours after Trump survived the attempted assassination in Pennsylvania, Vance had blamed President Biden for the attack. "Today is not just some isolated incident," Vance wrote. "The central premise of the Biden campaign is that President Donald Trump is an authoritarian fascist who must be stopped at all cost. That rhetoric led directly to President Trump's attempted assassination." Authorities have not identified the shooter's motive.

While some in Trump's inner circle doubted that he would want to choose a potential heir, with the selection of JD Vance, he might just have done that.

Trump hailed the Republican delegates at Fiserv Forum in Milwaukee.

UNBOWED AT THE CONVENTION

"I wasn't supposed to be here," Trump told Republicans as he recounted the July attempt on his life and accepted his third presidential nomination.

BY NIK POPLI

JUST FIVE DAYS AFTER SURVIVING AN assassination attempt, former president Donald Trump took to the stage at the Republican National Convention to accept his party's nomination for a third consecutive presidential bid.

Making his first public remarks since the shooting, Trump called for unity, a theme that emerged throughout the convention after the violence at a Pennsylvania rally, which took the life of one attendee. In the second half of his speech, he invoked familiar motifs of political persecution, illegal immigration and taxes, returning to the more typical tone and content of his political speeches.

Trump's address marked the end of a strategically orchestrated four-day event that saw the Republican Party coalesce around his leadership once more, underscoring his enduring influence despite his ongoing legal battles and controversies. Here are the key moments from Trump's speech.

STORY OF THE ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT

Trump began by addressing the assassination attempt on his life at a rally in Butler, Pennsylvania, on July 13, describing in cinematic detail the scene of how he was shot. "You'll never hear it from me a second time because it's actually too painful to tell," Trump said, saying the bullet came within a quarter of an inch of taking his life.

"Prior to the shot, if I had not moved my head at that very last instant, the assassin's bullet would have perfectly hit its mark, and I would not be here tonight," he said.

Describing the moment he was hit, Trump said, "I heard a loud whizzing sound and felt something hit me really, really hard on my right ear." The crowd fell silent. "There was blood pouring everywhere, and yet in a certain way I felt very safe because I had God on my side," Trump said.

He wore a bandage on his right ear throughout the convention. "I'm not supposed to be here tonight," Trump remarked. The crowd responded: "Yes you are! Yes you are!"

Referring again to the shooting, Trump said, "Once my clenched fist went up, and it was high into the air…the crowd realized I was OK and roared with pride for our country like no crowd I have ever heard before…. For the rest of my life, I will be grateful for the love shown by that giant audience of patriots."

Trump said he'd spoken to the families of the two people who were wounded and one killed in the shooting, calling them "real Trumpsters." More than $6 million was raised for the families, Trump said. He then kissed the helmet of Corey Comperatore, the volunteer firefighter who was killed at the rally, and held a moment of silence for him.

A UNITY PITCH

Trump used his speech to call for the "discord and division in our society" to be healed in the wake of his shooting.

"The discord and division in our society must be healed, and we must heal it quickly," he said. "We rise together or we fall apart. I am running to be president for all of America, not half of America. Because there is no victory in winning for half of America."

Melania Trump made her first convention appearance for her husband's acceptance speech.

POLICY POSITIONS

Trump outlined a few policy proposals during his speech, drawing a contrast with the Biden administration over the economy, immigration and foreign policy. He offered few new details but vowed to increase oil drilling and finish building the border wall between the U.S. and Mexico, and said he would end the wars in Ukraine and Gaza. He did not mention abortion, which Democrats made a focal point of their campaign against him.

On the topic of inflation, Trump said he would "end the inflation crisis" by drilling for oil to lower energy costs. Doing so, he said, would bring down prices for transportation, manufacturing and household goods. "So much starts with energy," Trump said.

He called the Democrats' climate-change policies a "green new scam" that has "caused tremendous inflationary pressures" and vowed to redirect money set aside for those initiatives to "important projects like roads, bridges, dams." Last year was the hottest year on record, and scientists say the world is on track to heat up even more, such that some parts of the planet will become uninhabitable.

Trump also said he would reverse Biden's electric vehicle policies designed to encourage EV manufacturing and sales on his first day in office.

Trump returned to comfortable territory, pledging to curb illegal immigration and shut down the U.S.–Mexico border. He showed a favorite chart about illegal immigration trends in the country—the same one he was showing at his rally in Pennsylvania at the moment he was shot.

WORDS FOR MELANIA

Trump acknowledged his wife, Melania, in her first public appearance at the convention. "You also did something really beautiful, a letter to America, calling for national unity," he said, referencing a statement she put out after the shooting at his rally. "And it really took the Republican Party by surprise. I will tell you it was beautiful."

A NOD TO THE HEIR APPARENT

Trump also took a moment to introduce his running mate, Ohio Sen. JD Vance, who many consider to be Trump's heir apparent to the MAGA throne. Looking at the first-term senator in the VIP box, he told Vance, who is 40, "You're going to be doing this for a long time. Enjoy the ride." ☐

Immunity for Official Acts

★★★★★

The July Supreme Court decision was a big one in favor of a candidate facing multiple prosecutions.

BY ERIC CORTELLESSA

More than two months after hearing oral arguments in the federal election interference case brought by special counsel Jack Smith, the Supreme Court in July 2024 partially backed former president Donald Trump's claim that he was immune from criminal prosecution for actions he took while in office.

In a 6–3 decision split along ideological lines, the Supreme Court ruled that former presidents are largely immune from prosecution for official acts but not actions they took in office that aren't part of their job responsibilities.

The landmark ruling did not dismiss any of the criminal cases against Trump, including the state business fraud case in New York, the federal classified documents case in Florida and the state election interference case in Georgia. But it did send certain elements of Smith's federal election interference indictment back to a lower court to review which conduct would be protected and immune from prosecution.

The immediate effect of the high court's move was that it all but guaranteed that the stalled federal trial in Washington, D.C., would be delayed until after the November presidential election. Trump celebrated the ruling, calling it a "big win for the Constitution and democracy" in a post on his social media. He also claimed that it should put an end to all four of his criminal cases, including the New York case for which he was already convicted, though in September a federal judge rejected that argument about the New York case.

Chief Justice John Roberts with Justice Sonia Sotomayor, who vigorously dissented from the 6–3 decision.

The court's three liberal justices dissented, with Justice Sonia Sotomayor writing that the ruling "makes a mockery of the principle, foundational to our Constitution and system of government, that no man is above the law."

It remains to be seen how the immunity ruling will impact the other criminal cases against Trump. U.S. District Judge Tanya Chutkan, who is overseeing the election interference case in Washington, D.C., and who was appointed by former president Barack Obama, as of August 20 was sifting through the allegations in the indictment to separate Trump's official acts as president from private ones, when he was acting as a presidential candidate. Those acts included conversations Trump had with Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, who famously rejected Trump's pressure to "find" enough votes to flip the state's 2020 vote.

Originally, Chutkan had set Trump's trial in the Smith case to begin on March 4, 2024, but Trump's appeal to the Supreme Court resulted in a delay in the proceedings, paving the way for his New York business records case to be the first to reach trial. Trump was found guilty and convicted on all 34 counts in that case, and the sentencing is scheduled for November 26. The criminal case in Georgia was paused in June; the Florida case, which was dismissed in July, is on appeal.

Now that Trump has been elected president again, he could order the Justice Department to dismiss the federal charges against him.

THE NOT-SO-GREAT DEBATE

Accusations flew in a testy meeting between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris.

BY NIK POPLI AND CHANTELLE LEE

VICE PRESIDENT KAMALA HARRIS and former President Donald Trump faced off in their first—and only—debate, hosted by ABC News at Philadelphia's National Constitution Center on September 10. It was also the first time the two candidates had met in person, after Trump broke tradition in 2021 by skipping the inauguration of his successor. The matchup began with a handshake, but it quickly descended into a series of sharp exchanges as Trump and Harris traded barbs.

The previous debate between President Joe Biden and Trump had been marred by awkward fumbling and eventually led to Biden dropping out of the race after facing criticism from members of his own party and prominent Democratic donors over his poor performance. Harris, as the new Democratic candidate, tried to turn the tables on Trump by portraying him as the fumbling one and attempting to get under his skin.

Here were the biggest moments from the night.

TRUMP SAID HE WOULD NOT SIGN A NATIONAL ABORTION BAN

The candidates sparred over abortion, one of Trump's biggest electoral vulnerabilities, as Harris slammed him over his role in appointing three Supreme Court justices who overturned Roe v. Wade. "One does not have to abandon their faith or deeply held beliefs to agree the government and Donald Trump certainly should not be telling a woman what to do with her body," Harris said.

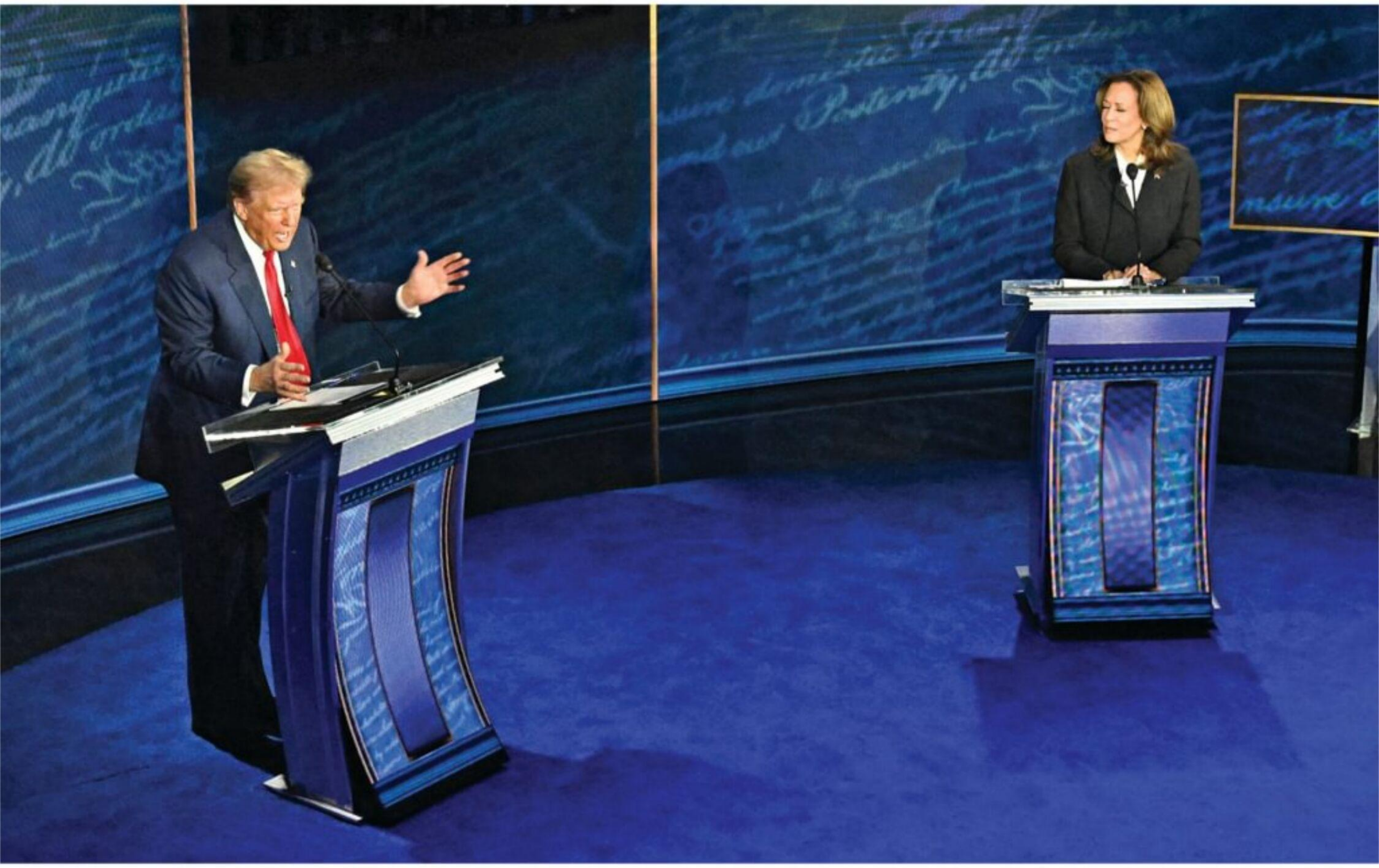
In describing the ways women have been denied abortion care, Harris said that her opponent would enact a national abortion ban if he won—a claim that Trump rebuffed. "It's a lie," he said, adding, "I'm not signing a ban, and there's no reason to sign a ban, because we've gotten what everybody wanted." Pressed further on where he stands on a national abortion ban, Trump would not explicitly say if he would veto one, instead claiming that it would never get through Congress.

Trump said the issue of abortion should be left to individual states, but he also defended his endorsement of the six-week abortion ban on the Florida ballot, a shift from his previous position. "It's the vote of the people now. It's not tied up in the federal government. I did a great service in doing it," Trump said of overturning Roe v. Wade. "It took courage to do it. And the Supreme Court had great courage in doing it."

More than 20 states have banned abortion or restricted the procedure earlier in pregnancy since the Supreme Court eliminated the constitutional right to abortion nationwide.

TRUMP PUSHED A BASELESS CLAIM ABOUT IMMIGRANTS EATING PETS

While discussing immigration, Trump amplified a highly controversial and unfounded claim about migrants in Springfield, Ohio. He suggested that Haitian immigrants in that area were eating pets, saying, "They're eating the dogs, the cats. They're



The clash in Philadelphia was the first time the candidates had met.

eating the pets of the people that live there." The statement echoed a baseless internet conspiracy that has been debunked by local authorities and media fact-checkers.

David Muir, one of the debate's moderators, promptly challenged Trump's claims, highlighting that local police in Springfield had found no evidence to support such allegations. The rumors, which originated from a Facebook post and were boosted by conservative media, were dismissed by officials who confirmed that there had been no credible reports of pets being harmed by the immigrant community.

TRUMP TRIED TO WALK BACK AN ADMISSION THAT HE LOST THE 2020 ELECTION

The former president attempted to retract a comment he had made in an interview days before the debate that he lost the 2020 election "by a whisker," claiming that he had been speaking sarcastically.

"I said that?" Trump asked after the moderator read back his statement from an interview at a Moms for Liberty event. Trump, who has long maintained that the 2020 election was "stolen" despite a lack of evidence, insisted his recent remark "was said sarcastically," and he firmly rejected any acknowledgement of his loss to Biden.

TRUMP AND HARRIS CLASHED OVER THEIR ECONOMIC PLANS

The debate began with a question about the state of the economy—one of the top issues facing voters. Asked if Americans were better off than they were four years ago, Harris didn't directly answer but instead said she was "raised as a middle-class kid" and had a plan to help American families worried about the economy and cost of living.

Trump attempted to blame Harris for the persistent inflation in recent years, falsely claiming that the U.S. experienced the highest inflation ever under President Biden. (Inflation hit 9.1 percent in June 2022; it was nearly 15 percent in 1980 and was even higher in 1917.) Trump also falsely claimed that there was "no inflation, virtually no

inflation" during his term in office. Cumulative inflation over the course of Trump's presidency was about 7.8 percent.

HARRIS CRITIQUED TRUMP'S HISTORY OF RACIST REMARKS

Asked about his past comments falsely suggesting that Harris "happened to turn Black" for political purposes, Trump said that he "couldn't care less" about her race.

Harris, born of Jamaican and Indian immigrants, responded by accusing Trump of using race to divide Americans throughout his life. She pointed to a housing discrimination lawsuit his development company faced in the 1970s for denying housing to Black Americans; his taking out of a full-page newspaper ad calling for the death penalty against the Central Park Five, a group of young Black and Latino teenagers who were ultimately exonerated; and the "birther" conspiracy he started against former President Barack Obama.

"I think it's a tragedy that we have someone who wants to be president who has, consistently, over the course of his career, attempted to use race to divide the American people," Harris said.

HARRIS INVITED AMERICANS TO ATTEND A TRUMP RALLY

Harris took a jab at Trump by inviting viewers to attend one of his rallies. "You will see during the course of his rallies, he talks about fictional characters like Hannibal Lecter. He will talk about windmills cause cancer," she said. "What you will also notice is that people start leaving his rallies early out of exhaustion and boredom. And I will tell you, the one thing you will not hear him talk about is you. You will not hear him talk about your needs, your dreams and your desires."

TRUMP: "I HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH PROJECT 2025"

Harris accused Trump of planning to implement Project 2025, a controversial presidential transition operation led by right-wing think tank the Heritage Foundation. The project's nearly 1,000-page handbook outlines a conservative agenda for the next administration, including dramatically expanding presidential power and cracking down on abortion pills.

"I have nothing to do with Project 2025," Trump said. "I haven't read it. I don't want to read it purposely. I'm not going to read it."

Harris's expressions offered in-debate commentary; afterward, Trump (opposite) delivered spin-room boasts.

TRUMP WOULDN'T SAY IF HE WANTED UKRAINE TO WIN ITS WAR WITH RUSSIA

The conflict in Ukraine emerged as a focal point as the candidates presented starkly contrasting views on U.S. involvement and strategy. Trump notably avoided directly addressing whether he wanted Ukraine to win the war against Russia, instead focusing on his desire to end the conflict.

"I want the war to stop, I want to save lives," Trump said, without elaborating on how he would achieve this.

Harris condemned Trump's stance and argued that his approach would have dire consequences for Ukraine and U.S. allies. "If Donald Trump were president, Putin would be sitting in Kyiv right now," she said.

HARRIS SAID WORLD LEADERS ARE "LAUGHING" AT TRUMP

Harris continued to condemn the former president for denying the results of the 2020 election. She said that Trump was "fired" by the American people when he lost the 2020 race, adding that the country "cannot afford" to have a leader who denies election results.

"I have traveled the world as vice president of the United States, and world leaders are laughing at Donald Trump," Harris said. "I have talked with military leaders, some of whom worked with you, and they say you're a disgrace."

Trump retorted by pointing to Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán's endorsement of him.

THE MODERATORS FACT-CHECKED THE DEBATE, SPARKING PRAISE AND CRITICISM

During the first presidential debate in June, Biden and Trump both threw out claims that were false or misleading—and CNN moderators didn't provide real-time fact-checking. That wasn't the case in this debate. ABC News moderators Muir and Linsey Davis repeatedly fact-checked Trump's claims, including falsehoods about Tim Walz supporting "execution after birth" and, as previously mentioned, immigrants eating pets.

Some people online applauded Muir and Davis's efforts. But conservatives and Trump allies railed against them. Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who suspended his independent campaign for president and endorsed Trump in August, accused the two moderators of being "biased" because, he claimed, they were "constantly fact-checking" Trump but neglecting to do the same for Harris.

CNN anchor Abby Phillip posted on X in defense of her ABC News peers: "Just FYI: When there is asymmetrical lying, there will be asymmetrical fact checking." ▯

The Myths About His Conviction

★★★★★

Clearing up the misconceptions about what happened in Trump's "hush money" trial.

BY BARBARA MCQUADE

Depending on your perspective, the conviction of Donald Trump on 34 counts in a Manhattan courtroom on May 30, 2024, was either a refreshing affirmation of the rule of law or a miscarriage of justice in a politically motivated prosecution. A jury returned a verdict finding that Trump had caused the falsification of checks, invoices and ledgers to conceal the payment of $130,000 to adult film actress Stormy Daniels shortly before the 2016 presidential election, with intent to conceal the violation of campaign finance and tax laws.

We are all entitled to our own views of the case, of course, but opinion should also be based on facts. Certain myths crept into the conversation, and it's worth examining some of them in order to dispel them.

MYTH: Prosecutors stretched the law to convert a misdemeanor into a felony.
Under New York law, a simple falsification of business records without any intent to commit or conceal another crime is a violation of the statute in the second degree, punishable as a misdemeanor.

An intent to conceal another crime is an aggravating factor that brings enhanced penalties, such as a felony. This law containing degrees of severity was enacted by the New York legislature, and it is a common way of structuring laws with escalating penalties for more egregious violations. (For example, penalties for federal drug offenses range from misdemeanors for simple possession to lengthy terms of imprisonment for aggravating factors based on quantity or intent to distribute.) The grand jury found probable cause of 34 violations in the first degree, and the trial jury found proof of these crimes beyond a reasonable doubt.

MYTH: The prosecution didn't tell Trump what he was charged with until closing arguments, a violation of due process.
While the indictment specified each of the checks, invoices and ledger entries that were alleged to have been falsified, it did not specify which crime Trump allegedly concealed. New York case law requires that the indictment allege only a general intent to conceal a crime, not an intent to conceal a specific crime.

MYTH: It was improper for a state prosecutor to charge a federal offense.
The parties litigated this issue months before the trial, and the court found that statutes outside of the laws of New York were proper bases to be considered "other crimes." For example, case law has held that an offense under the New York statute prohibiting possession of a concealed weapon by a person who has been "previously convicted of any crime" may be proved by showing that the person was convicted of a crime in another state. New York courts have also upheld the use of federal offenses as the predicate crimes in other cases involving the falsification of business records in the first degree, the very crime that Trump was charged with in this case.

MYTH: Trump would not have been charged for a mere bookkeeping error if his name were anything other than Donald J. Trump.
The Manhattan DA's office has filed charges for falsification of business records 9,794 times between 2015 and March 2023. When announcing the charges, Alvin Bragg emphasized the importance of the integrity of business records in Manhattan, "home to the country's most significant business market." At the time of Trump's indictment, Bragg had already filed 120 cases alleging violations of New York penal law 175.10, all of them in the first degree based on the concealment or commission of another crime.

MYTH: There is nothing illegal about paying hush money. Famous people do it all the time.
Paying hush money is not a crime in itself, but it is a crime to falsify business records. And it is a more serious crime to falsify business records with intent to conceal other crimes, as in this case. These include violations of campaign finance laws by accepting donations over the legal limit, and violations of tax laws by inaccurately characterizing the payments as income.

MYTH: The charges were filed after lengthy delay to interfere with Trump's campaign for president.
While prosecutors have discretion as to whether and when charges should be filed, there is no evidence that this case was brought to interfere with an election. In fact, the trial court found that the reason for the delay in bringing charges was partly Trump's own doing.

In 2018, the case was being investigated by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York, which convicted Trump's lawyer Michael Cohen for the same conduct, and referred to Trump in the charging document as "Individual-1." For reasons that are unknown, federal prosecutors

Trump, with attorney Todd Blanche, made his case to the press midway through his New York trial.

during the Trump administration did not bring charges against Trump. Once federal prosecutors closed their investigation, Bragg's predecessor, Cyrus Vance Jr., started this investigation, but it was delayed by Trump's prolonged challenges to grand jury subpoenas for his financial records. Trump took his objections all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

When Vance retired and Bragg was elected, Bragg insisted on reviewing the evidence before deciding whether to continue with the case. Ultimately, he decided to go forward. All of these factors contributed to the delay.

MYTH: Justice Juan Merchan was biased because of his $35 financial contribution to Joe Biden and because of his daughter's work as a Democratic political consultant.
Justice Merchan sought an opinion from the New York Advisory Committee on Judicial Ethics regarding both of these issues and received an opinion that he need not recuse himself from the case. The finding of Trump's guilt was made by a jury—one that Trump's lawyers had a hand in selecting.

MYTH: Justice Merchan violated Trump's rights to defend himself by refusing to permit him to call an expert witness.
Trump's defense wanted to call Brad Smith, a former member of the Federal Election Commission, as an expert witness on federal election law. Expert witnesses are permitted to testify in trials to assist the jury in understanding facts about matters beyond ordinary understanding. Matters of law, in contrast, are for the judge to provide.

Justice Merchan did not prohibit Smith from testifying, but when he ruled that Smith could testify only about facts, and not law, Trump's team decided not to call Smith as a witness. Contrary to this myth, Justice Merchan would have been in error if he had permitted Trump to call an expert witness to testify about the law.

MYTH: Justice Merchan violated Trump's First Amendment rights to free speech and to testify in his own defense by imposing a gag order in the case.
The gag order entered by Justice Merchan and upheld by the appeals division did not prevent Trump from testifying in his own defense—a right Merchan explained to Trump in open court during the trial. Trump had every right to do so, and he chose to instead exercise his right to remain silent at trial.

The gag order restricted the defense from making statements outside of court that targeted witnesses, jurors, staff and family members of the court and prosecution team, though not Justice Merchan or DA Bragg himself. The court of appeals found that the order properly protected witnesses and the fair administration of justice. ☐

ASCENT INTO POLITICS

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Trump made his name as a businessman and TV star before shocking the establishment and becoming a president like no other.

Trump at a rally in Sanford, Florida, in 2016 during the first of his three presidential campaigns.

HIS LIFE BEFORE POLITICS

Trump built a real estate empire and then parlayed his reputation as a dealmaker into a new kind of fame through reality television.

THE FAMILY BUSINESS

In 1973, Donald Trump and his father, Fred, surveyed Brooklyn apartment buildings developed by Fred.

A MAN ON THE RISE

Left: Trump in 1964 at age 18 at the private New York Military Academy in Cornwall.

Above: In 1987, he posed with first wife Ivana and their household staff at Mar-a-Lago in Palm Beach, Florida.

Above right: Trump in the atrium of Trump Tower in New York City in 1989.

Right: Trump and his father with New York Mayor Ed Koch in 1982.

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A LIFE OF OPPORTUNITY

Left: Trump and Ivana with their three children, Don Jr., Ivanka and Eric, in 1986.

Above: Trump, who owned the Miss USA Pageant from 1996 to 2015, met with contestants at Trump Tower in 2011.

Right: Trump made "You're fired" a catchphrase when he starred on the NBC reality show The Apprentice *from 2004 to 2015.*

FIRST STEPS TO THE WHITE HOUSE

Trump announced his candidacy for president at Trump Tower in New York City on June 16, 2015.

TRUMP
Stronger America
MAKE HISTORY 6/16/15
TRUMP
MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!

AN UPSET TO THE SYSTEM

In a 2016 election night shocker, voters sent the most unconventional and impolitic candidate in memory straight to the Oval Office.

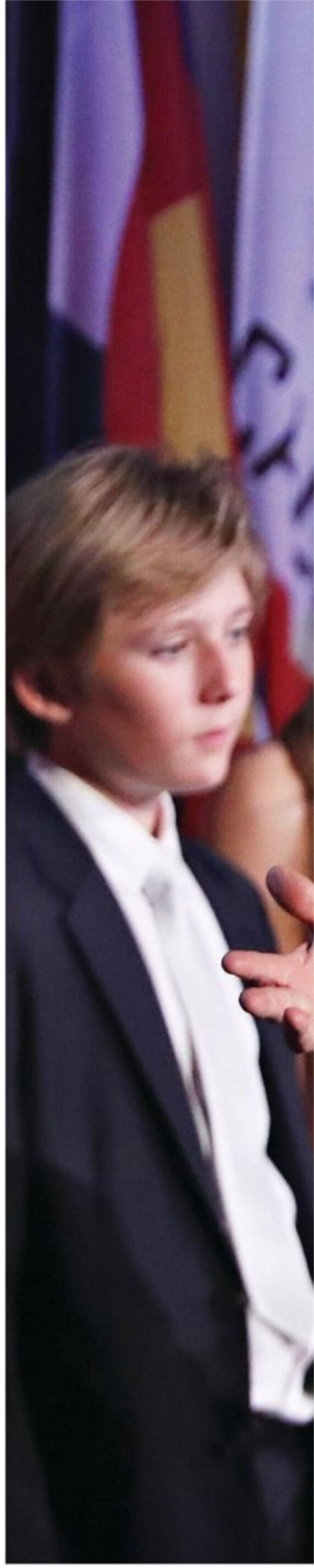
BY DAVID VON DREHLE

First published November 9, 2016

IT WAS ALMOST 3 A.M. WHEN THE PRESIdent-elect finally took the stage, his blue suit, white shirt and red tie perfectly matched to the phalanx of flags arranged behind him. The polls and the experts and the data modelers had predicted it would be a woman for the first time in the nation's history—but no, it was another man, another blue suit, another red tie.

And yet, if it had been the woman, everyone would have known what to expect.

Donald John Trump, political novice, self-promoter and gleeful provocateur, was elected the 45th president of the United States on November 8, 2016, in one of the most extraordinary and unforeseen developments in American history. Universally dismissed as a vanity candidate when he entered a field crowded with Republican talent, the former Democrat and former Independent mowed down 16 primary challengers while breaking every rule in the book. Then he pivoted to take on one of the most seasoned and famous politicians in the world—a former secretary of state, U.S. senator and first lady—lost three straight debates to her (accord-



The businessman "harnessed what the American people are tired of and sick of," an aide said of Trump, here in Daytona Beach, Florida, in August 2016.

ing to opinion surveys) and earned the disapproval of roughly 60 percent of all Americans. A dozen women accused him of sexual assault. He bragged about earning tens of millions of dollars each year while never paying income tax. His margin of victory in the Electoral College was the largest any Republican had achieved since 1988.

What would he say when he came to the podium for his victory speech?

What could anyone say?

Of Hillary Clinton, the opponent he threatened to put in jail if he was elected, Trump said, "We owe her a major debt of gratitude for her service to our country."

Of the nearly 60 million Americans who voted for Clinton after she denounced Trump relentlessly as a racist and sexist, Trump said, "I'm reaching out to you for your guidance and your help so that we can work together and unify our great country."

Of the global community whose trade treaties he vowed to dismantle and whose alliances he called into question, Trump said, "I want to tell the world community that while we will always put America's interests first, we will deal fairly with everyone."

Of his plans, which have always been lightly sketched at best, Trump said, "America will no longer settle for anything less than the best."

That is what he said, in a speech so subdued and low-energy that it could have been a hospital director's annual message to the medical staff. Left unsaid was how he could make himself into the gentle, unifying and effective force he spoke of on that victory stage. If he chooses to do so, it will be a long, steep hill to climb.

Why? Because candidate Trump either insulted women, Hispanics, Muslims, Blacks, disabled people and so on and so on—or else spoke so loosely and carelessly that millions of people misunderstood him. In a president, either one is bad.

He'd be trying to heal the country in a climate of utter contempt for government. Throughout his campaign, Trump heaped abuse on presidents from Barack Obama to Ronald Reagan, on Congress and the courts, on America's military leaders and foreign envoys. The entire apparatus, he preached again and again, is "a rigged system." That was the government he was put in charge of.

He would be seeking to win the trust of Black and brown Americans, of American Muslims and Jews, while white nationalist bigots and anti-Semites were cheering his victory. Trump picked at sores in the election that would bleed before they healed.

He would be trying to define a mandate despite his failure to win the popular vote, with Clinton topping him in that count by nearly 3 million.

President Trump would be trying to strengthen the U.S. while at the same time extricating it from a network of security alliances and free-trade agreements that underpinned the world order. News of his victory sent markets into a brief swoon, from Tokyo to New York. The Mexican peso took its biggest plunge in more than 20 years. Amplifying the shock of the Brexit vote in June 2016, which seemed like it might be the first step in breaking up the European Union, Trump's win could shatter the fragile world recovery.

He'd be facing in Congress a Republican Party that he took by force, not by persuasion, and dealing with the wreckage. In victory, he lavishly praised RNC chairman Reince Priebus, but that alone wouldn't mend the damage done. A party supposedly pledged to conservative values had elected a radical president who promised to tear up treaties, overturn laws, jail his opponent and sue his critics. On the morning after, House speaker Paul Ryan, a Trump skeptic, glossed over the fact that the winner's campaign was thick with his enemies. Instead, he proclaimed a Republican dawn. With the GOP in control of the White House and Congress, Ryan said, the party would heal around a mission to repeal Obamacare.

Trump would be expecting Americans to trust his family as they ran the large international business he built, the one that rested mainly on selling the family name, after he devoted his campaign to attacking his opponent for co-mingling the national interest with personal gain.

He would be asking Americans to have faith in his choice of people, when he allied himself with the Internet's noisiest conspiracy theorist. To have faith in his prudence, when he attacked a former beauty queen on Twitter at 3 in the morning. To have faith in his temperament, when he repeatedly allowed himself to be goaded during debates.

Perhaps no other presidential election raised so many questions with so few answers. The president-elect had no track record, few associates, very little in the way of policy positions. He believed America was broken. He said at his convention: "I alone can fix it."

Now it would be up to him to show if he can.

A bloodied veteran of the casino business, where he built an empire and lost a fortune, Trump knew

Trump had the uncanny ability to convince voters who were utterly unlike him that he was the embodiment of everything they wanted in a president.

what it meant to push all your chips onto the table and blow on the dice. That's how he ran his unprecedented campaign, gambling that Americans would elevate a man who toyed with their prejudices, tickled their ids, dodged his taxes, exaggerated his philanthropy, skimmed over policy and flouted the truth. He took people seriously when they told pollsters, year after dismal year, how sick they were of politics as usual. Nothing in politics is more unusual than Trump.

Trump's favorite bets are on himself. The man hates to finish second. Second is for "losers"—a favorite Trump epithet—and life presents endless chances to win or lose. Who but Trump would have mentioned, on the very day the Twin Towers were destroyed, that he now owned the tallest building in lower Manhattan? Who else would think to create a hierarchy of Vietnam heroes and say of former POW John McCain, "I like people who weren't captured"? Finding himself late in the campaign in a room with Medal of Honor winners, he entertained the idea that they might be braver than he. Then he dodged the implication by redefining the competition: "I am financially brave," he concluded.

In this ultimate victory, Trump credited himself with leading "the single greatest movement in the history of this country," as he put it in the final hours of the campaign. His promise: to "win, win, win and win." His aim: to "make America great again." His genius: to convince people by the millions whose lives are utterly unlike his that he alone could be trusted with their grudges, their passions and their resentments.

The thrice-married former playboy who spoke on video about assaulting women persuaded evangelicals to turn out as never before. They accepted his conversion to pro-life fervor and relished his pledge to push the Supreme Court to the right. "God uses the least likely," South Carolina televangelist Mark Burns explained, "from myself to Donald Trump."

The former Democrat from Manhattan and longtime donor to liberals persuaded the hardest right-wingers to fall into line. The billionaire channeled anti–Wall Street energy. The Wharton graduate found the wavelength of non-college-educated voters. And Trump rode this movement, exactly as he said he would, on a straight line from the edge of Philadelphia to the streets of Green Bay, Wisconsin, winning Great Lakes states that Republicans have not won in years, in some cases decades.

Since entering the race with a fantastical promise to wall off America's Southern border and send the bill to Mexico, Trump unleashed one surprise—and one shock—after another. Policies that would be preposterous coming from anyone else, such as

A scene from a Trump rally in Lakeland, Florida, in 2016; he would win the Sunshine State by 1.2 percent, contributing 29 votes to his hefty 304–227 Electoral College victory.

barring Muslims from entering the country or hiking tariffs on U.S. goods while somehow erasing trade barriers erected by other nations, sounded magical to his huge campaign audiences. Outrages that would sink an ordinary candidate, such as mocking a person with a congenital disease or condoning violence at his campaign rallies, buoyed Trump to the top the polls.

What Flubber was to physics, Trump is to politics: an antidote to gravity, cooked up by a daft but prodigious amateur.

Other candidates worked to relate their lives to the struggles of ordinary voters. Trump did the opposite, encouraging Americans to savor vicariously his billionaire's privilege of saying whatever he damn well pleased. "I love Donald Trump because he's so totally politically incorrect. He's gone after every group," said Greg Casady, 61, an Army veteran who had attended a Trump rally in Council Bluffs, Iowa.

Have mouth, will travel. Spurning the traditional campaign tactics of photo ops and TV ads, Trump used his celebrity to pack arenas and football stadiums from coast to coast while dominating the 24-hour news cycle.

How did he do it? Not with spellbinding oratory, that's for sure. Trump treated his audiences to rambling speeches unlike anything in the modern campaign repertoire. He sampled alter egos from talk-radio host to insult comic to the fictional Gordon Gekko. ("I'm greedy," Trump bragged at more than one rally. "Now I'm going to be greedy for the United States.")

Like any good salesman, Trump had a feel for the hopes and fears of his customers. He sensed their anxiety about the disruptions of globalization. In a dog-eat-dog world, they wanted a bigger, meaner dog. But there was more. Trump may be the cutting edge of a new era in politics, an era in which technological change remade democracy as it has remade so many other aspects of society.

What Amazon has done to traditional retailers, what Uber has done to taxi companies, what Craigslist has done to the local newspaper, Trump has done to politics.

Disintermediation is a long word for a seem-

ingly simple idea: dumping the middleman. Donald Trump was history's first disintermediated presidential candidate. He sidestepped the traditional go-betweens—party, press, pollsters and poohbahs—to sell his candidacy directly to voters, via social media.

Trump tended to his virtual community with care. When his Twitter feed attracted its 2 millionth follower, he tweeted, "It's like having your own newspaper." By campaign's end, circulation was 14 million. Trump had 13.5 million Facebook likes and more than 3.4 million Instagram followers. For many, if not all, of these individuals, their networked relationships with Trump felt closer and more genuine than the images of Trump they saw filtered through others.

This could explain why Trump was unscathed by apparent gaffes and blunders that would have killed an ordinary candidate. His followers felt that they already knew him. When outraged pundits wailed in disgust on cable news programs and in op-ed columns, they only highlighted their irrelevance to the Trumpiverse. Trump understood this, too, about his audience: Mocking abuse of the press corps was a staple of his campaign speeches.

TRUMP WAS UNSCATHED BY SEEMING GAFFES BECAUSE HIS FOLLOWERS FELT THEY ALREADY KNEW HIM.

The direct relationship between Trump and his followers was partly the relationship of a narcissist to his mirror and partly the relationship of a demagogue to his mob. What it was absolutely not was the relationship of a public servant to his constituency. There was no statesmanlike agenda-setting in Trump's new politics; instead, the measure of his ideas was found in their visceral popularity.

Trump disclosed the meaning of his method in an interview with TIME as he winged across America on his private jet and watched himself dominating the news on a giant flat-screen TV: Once you build an audience, "that gives you power," he said. "It's not the polls. It's the ratings."

His rambling late-night Twitter rants and his loose-limbed, jazz-riff, fact-free speeches would have ended his chances if the middlemen still reigned. Instead, by some strange alchemy, they made him more real to his followers. More real, obviously, to the bigots and trolls who made him a hero of the so-called Alt Right. But also more real to voters for whom his style signified freedom from worn-out conventions and a refusal to toe the line. Trump's supporters didn't take him seriously, except when they did. He was like the guy at work who makes inappropriate jokes but never misses his monthly sales quota.

His voters did not want someone to feel their pain; they wanted someone to mirror their mood. Now, the mood was anger. Trump supporters were and are angry about an economy that punishes workers. They are angry with politicians who don't deliver on their promises. His strongest backers are angry about illegal immigration. His rallies attracted protesters who were angry about Trump's success, and his supporters and his protesters clashed violently at events across the country. Playing with fire, Trump said of one protester, "Maybe he should have been roughed up."

His voters are angry, but that doesn't mean they're crazy. You met more state representatives and business owners at his rallies than tinfoil-hat conspiracy buffs. But they had given up on conventional politicians and had no interest anymore in buying what the middlemen were selling. Instead, they went directly to the source. "It's like this," said Casady, the Army veteran at the Iowa rally. "We're going to go with this guy, sink or swim, and we're not going to change our views. It doesn't matter. It's time for us to do a totally insane thing, because we've lost it all. The times demand it, because nothing else is working."

As unlikely as it seemed when his glowing blond nimbus appeared at the dawn of the primary season, the developer who would take up residence in the ultimate real estate gem—the White House—had transformed the outlandish into the historic. In the process, he changed American politics.

THE SECRET OF HIS SUCCESS

Advisers and experts could offer advice, but in the end, Trump did it his way, connecting with voters who felt that their voices had been going unheard.

BY ZEKE J. MILLER

First published November 10, 2016

"I am asking for your vote so I can be your champion in the White House," Trump said at one rally. "We will once again be a country of law and order and a country of great success."

CHRIS REILLY, A COMMISSIONER in York County, Pennsylvania, had lived in the heavily Republican area north of Baltimore for 28 years. On the day in September 2016, after Mike Pence had spoken to some 800 folks in downtown York, Reilly scanned a panoramic picture of the crowd in the local paper and had a shock. "I recognized one face," he said. That's when the party stalwart knew something was going on.

Then, on a Friday before the election, Reilly got word that the county had received 9,000 absentee-ballot applications in a single day. It had to mail them out by Monday but had no money for extra help. So Reilly turned up at the election office on Saturday to stuff the applications into envelopes himself. As he did, he noticed something surprising: The applications were running 10 to 1 male. And when he peeked at the employment lines, he saw a pattern. "Dockworker. Forklift operator. Roofer," Reilly recalled. "Grouter. Warehouse stocker. These people had probably never voted before. They were coming out of nowhere."

Back in Manhattan, at the gilded Trump Tower, the most unconventional campaign in history put its faith in these voters. Hillary Clinton and her allies had run three TV ads for every one that Donald Trump got on the air. Her ground operation had tens of thousands more volunteers and hundreds more field offices. Trump had lost each of the debates against Clinton, and he had spent weeks defending himself from a video in which he bragged about sexually assaulting women. But only the Trump campaign had a candidate who had struck a nerve. Only the Trump campaign had a message that was breaking through.

"To a person, there was never a doubt that we could come back and win this race," said Trump's communications adviser, Jason Miller, one of just a handful of senior staff members who guided Trump through the final weeks. They saw it at the rallies, which they believed were a better measure than the polls. "You go to Scranton, you go to Dayton and ask those guys, 'Hey, do you feel like you have had 2.5 percent GDP growth this quarter?' " Miller told TIME just before Election Day. "They'll look at you like you have three heads." There were two Americas, after all, and one of them demanded to have its voice heard.

The task of the Trump campaign was to tap this seething populist distrust of the nation's elites, and they had no better foil than Clinton. From the beginning, Trump presented himself as a disruptive app; his campaign staff compared him to Uber. He had authenticity. He could draw a crowd. He could make statements—often outrageous and regularly false—that would spread through the media and social networks like wildfire. He was what the wizards in Silicon Valley call a platform: something new that people didn't know they needed and that everyone could use as they wished.

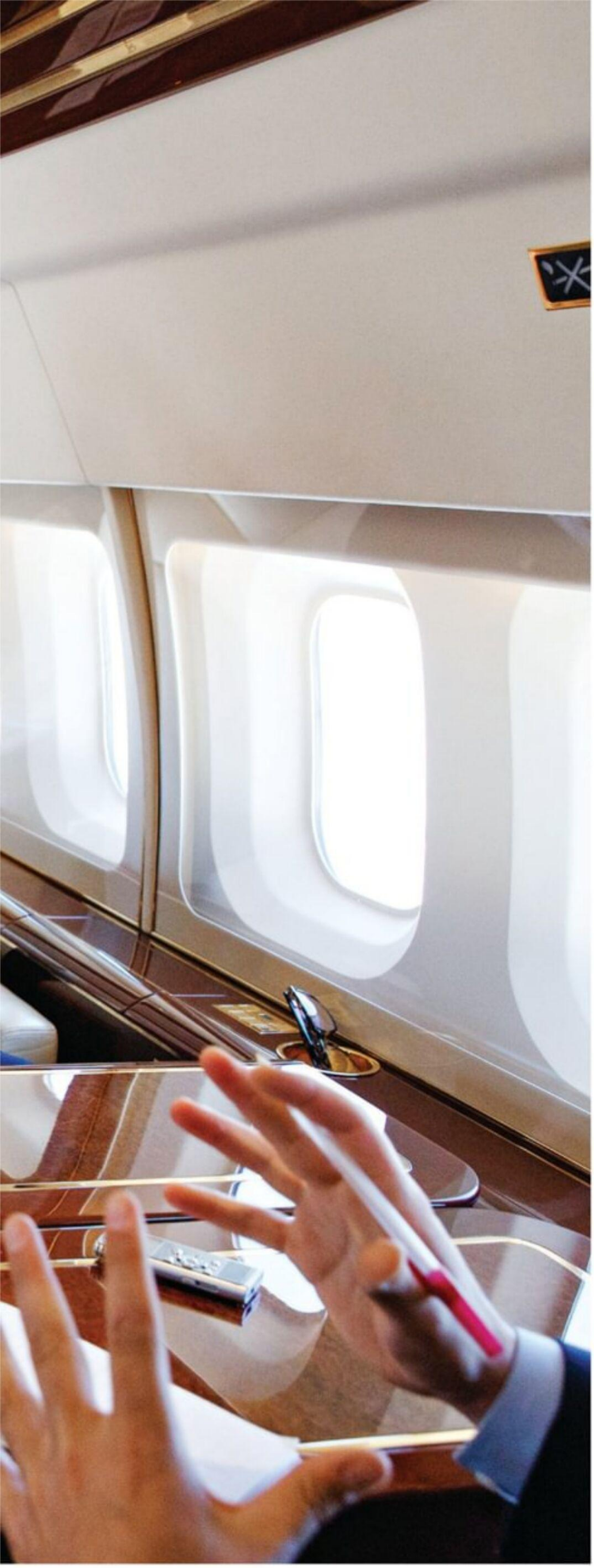
ONLY THE TRUMP CAMPAIGN HAD A CANDIDATE WHO HAD STRUCK A NERVE. ONLY THE TRUMP CAMPAIGN HAD A MESSAGE THAT WAS BREAKING THROUGH.

And, like a killer app, Donald Trump mowed down every challenge. It was his message, his vision, his stubbornness and bombast that changed the country. Trump was the one who picked immigration and trade as his signature issues. He recognized the populist tide waiting to be unleashed. If he stopped tweeting and started reading his speeches in the final weeks, it was only because he finally chose to heed long-ignored advice. Only those closest to him saw the upset coming.

For Corey Lewandowski, Trump's first campaign manager, the initial signs came early. Weeks after the campaign launched in June 2015, Lewandowski booked a stop in Laconia, New Hampshire, a town of about 17,000 that hosts the state's pumpkin festival. "We land at the Laconia airport. I look, and I literally have 15 messages, all from the same phone number," he remembers. It was the local police. "We've got a problem at the venue," the officer said.

These buttons were among the campaign souvenirs for sale outside the James A. Rhodes arena in Akron, Ohio, where Trump held a rally on August 22, 2016.

Trump was joined aboard his campaign plane by his vice presidential pick, Indiana governor Mike Pence, in September 2016.



A cruiser was waiting by the tarmac. So many people had turned out that the roads had been shut down. Two miles from the venue, cars lined the shoulders, because people had parked to walk. When the event was over, nearly 200 people followed Trump's entourage to the airport to send him off. "I said, 'Wow,'" Lewandowski recalls. "This is beyond anything."

This was the simple notion Trump and his ever-shifting team decided to build the campaign around. If he could keep the crowds, he could win. He wanted to fill them with spirit. He wanted to be fun. He was outrageous, a vessel for their anger. The larger the target he could topple, the better. No one would have advised him to do any of this, not even Lewandowski.

Time and again, Trump's advisers objected as he broke rules. A few weeks before Election Day, Trump promised a meaty policy speech in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Instead, he used the historic stage to threaten to sue the women accusing him of sexual assault. Campaign manager Kellyanne Conway pleaded with him to stay on message, but he would not be tamed. "You don't tell Trump 'You can't do this, stop doing that,'" said RNC strategist Sean Spicer. "You say, 'You know what would be more helpful or more effective?' Or, 'Right now the Dems are taking advantage of how you're saying this.'"

For weeks, his advisers told him his closing pitch to African American voters—"What the hell do you have to lose?"—could probably be better phrased. But then a Black pastor in Charlotte, North Carolina, came out after a shooting, echoing the same words to reflect his frustrations. "I think he's going to really surprise people with the numbers he gets among African Americans," said Miller. In the end, according to exit polls, Trump won 8 percent of the Black vote, two points more than Mitt Romney got four years before.

Lewandowski pointed to another moment when it all came together. In the final sprint to the South Carolina primary in February, his cellphone buzzed with leaked word that Pope Francis had slammed Trump's pledge to erect a wall between the U.S. and Mexico. It was "not Christian," the pontiff declared. In the tradition of the Vatican, the news wouldn't become public for an hour or two. Lewandowski advised caution as he searched for the Catholic share of the state's electorate. "You don't understand," he told his boss. "I'm Catholic. This is the pope."

But the reality host turned candidate had other ideas. "He just loves Mexico. He's brainwashed," Lewandowski recalls Trump saying. Without delay, Trump dictated a response, calling the pope's words "disgraceful." The next day, the pope released another statement, making clear he had not attacked Trump and was not indicating a political preference. Trump claimed victory. The reality show was real.

While Trump shot from the lip, the mechanics of building a campaign fell on others to figure out. A 15th-floor office in Trump Tower was filled by young staffers, many of whom had never worked on a congressional race, let alone a presidential bid. Wearing suits and slicked-back hair, they took their cues from the candidate in more ways than one. There were few late nights or early mornings but lots of bravado. "It's the island of misfit toys," one staffer said of the scene.

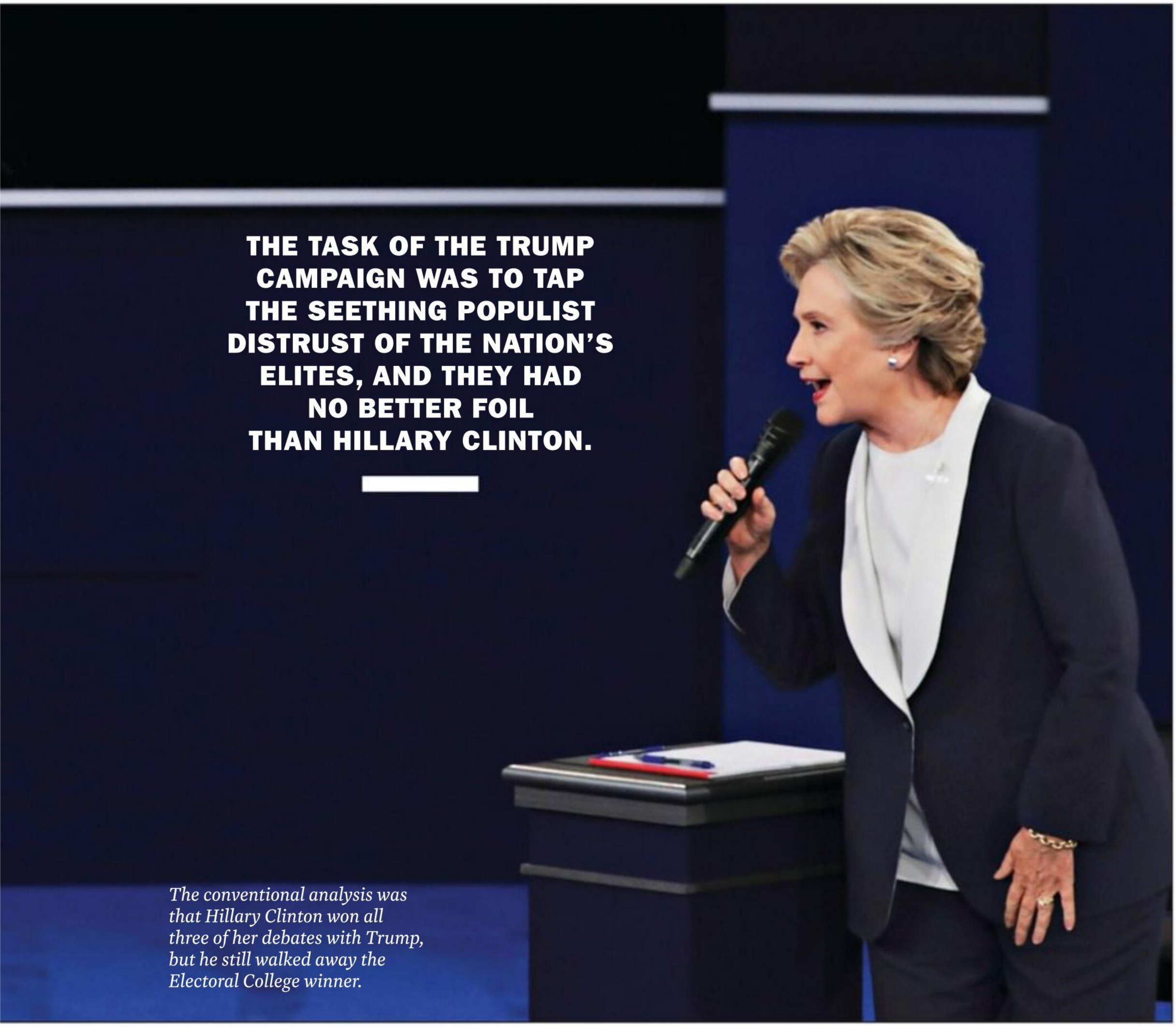
When Trump clinched the GOP nomination on May 3, he had no machine to drive his message. The skeletal campaign had fewer than 75 staff members, no field program or data operation and a meager fundraising outfit. But the Republican National Committee was ready to pick up the slack.

Aides deployed to San Antonio, the home base of Trump digital director Brad Parscale. A tall, bearded web designer who started his small business with $500, Parscale signed on with the campaign after working for Trump's companies. Through the early primaries, Parscale ran the digital team from a laptop in his living room. But he would emerge as one of the most powerful operatives in Trump's orbit, earning the ear of the candidate's influential son-in-law, Jared Kushner. Parscale and his team tested countless combinations of Facebook ads, designed to turn out disaffected whites and sow doubt about Clinton among young voters and minorities.

By the campaign's end, senior aides said, Parscale had a say over everything from the budget to creative, and from voter targeting to the candidate's schedule. He and deputy campaign manager David Bossie spent hours tossing a football in Trump Tower as they planned Trump's final campaign stops.

The big guns were run out of Washington. The national party had more staffers and full-time volunteers than in 2012, and its field army contacted some 20 million voters. "Every single thing Trump did that had anything to do with direct voter contact—a paid TV ad, a paid mail piece, paid phone call, door knock—was done because the RNC told him these things needed to be done," said Katie Walsh, the RNC chief of staff. Parscale credited their "hand in glove" relationship.

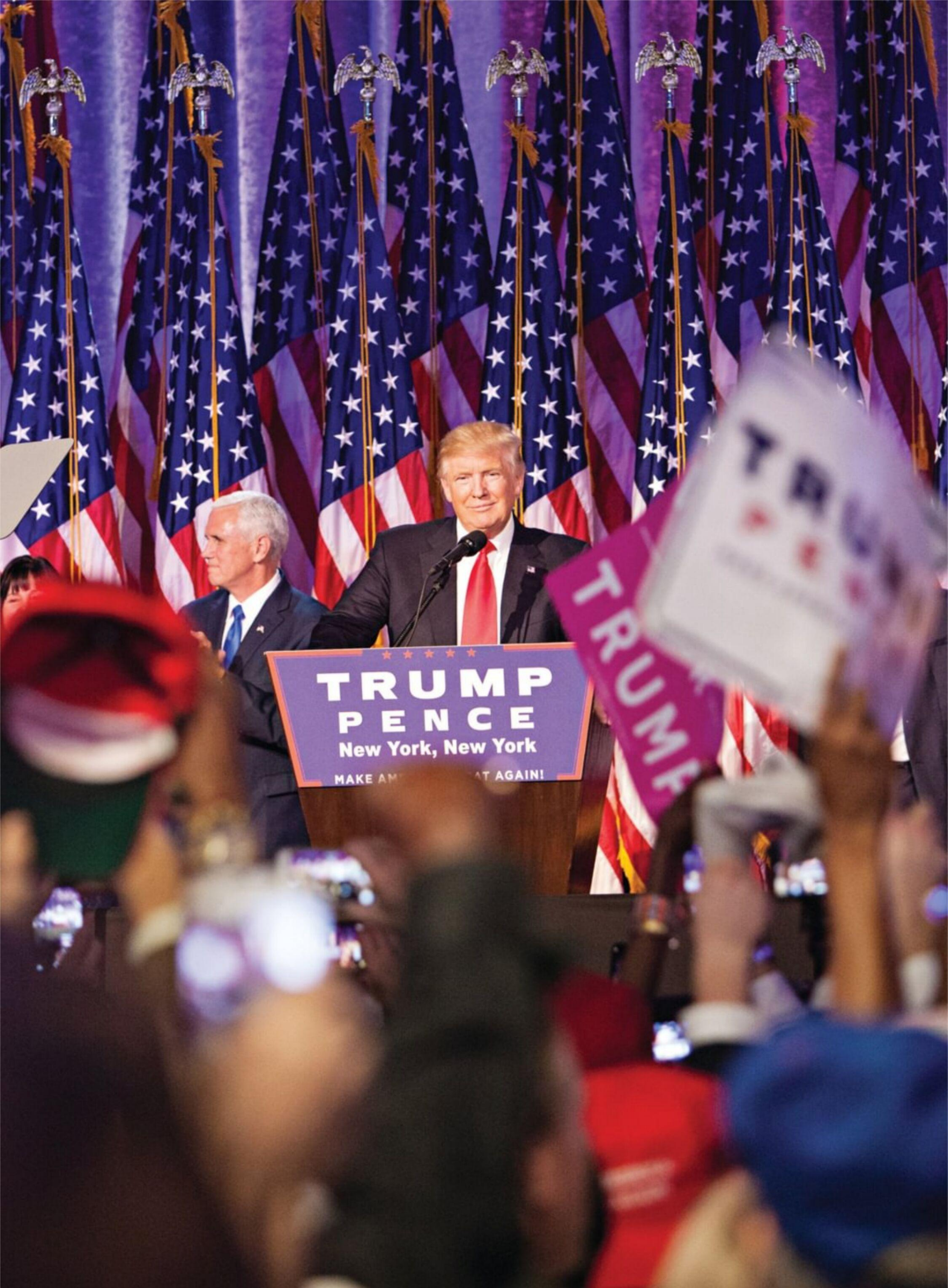
In the final weeks, the RNC's team was sending daily updates on where to send the candidate and put ads on television to reach more voters. Yet even the party's own models did not predict his victory. Just before election night, Republican aides told reporters they believed 12 states were within three points. At least eight broke for Trump. He won many of them handily. Inside Trump Tower,


THE TASK OF THE TRUMP CAMPAIGN WAS TO TAP THE SEETHING POPULIST DISTRUST OF THE NATION'S ELITES, AND THEY HAD NO BETTER FOIL THAN HILLARY CLINTON.

The conventional analysis was that Hillary Clinton won all three of her debates with Trump, but he still walked away the Electoral College winner.

Parscale was an optimist, projecting nearly the entire electoral map correctly on the Friday before Election Day. (His models missed the mark in Colorado and Wisconsin.)

Victory brought with it a challenge of huge proportions. Before January 20, Trump's transition team had to fill roughly 4,000 government jobs, from high-profile cabinet positions to bureaucratic backwaters. It would be a challenge for any incoming administration, but Trump's transition team was thin even by his standards. The effort was made up of about 100 people, the vast majority of whom were volunteers. Trump's transition chair, New Jersey governor Chris Christie, despite being distracted by the criminal prosecution of two former top aides, had spent recent months interviewing potential candidates. "I have a job to do to help get the administration ready," Christie told the *Today* show two days after Trump's election. He played it coy when asked if there might be a place for him in the new administration. "If there's some role for me that I want to do and that the president-elect wants


TRUMP
PENCE
New York, New York

On election night 2016, Trump praised his family at his victory celebration in New York City, saying, "I love you, and I thank you. This political stuff is nasty, and it's tough."

me to do—we've known each other for 14 years—we'll talk about it."

But vetting for the top posts had yet to formally begin, foreshadowing a frantic scramble. "It's very different" from a traditional transition effort, said a senior team member. "I think Romney had a better idea of what he wanted to do." Alabama senator Jeff Sessions told TIME on November 9, 2016, that "many decisions" had yet to be made.

One thing Trump knew: GOP chair Reince Priebus was the favorite to become chief of staff. That would reassure many Republicans, including House Speaker Paul Ryan, who must try to bridge their differences with a candidate who stormed to power by smashing the party's cherished principles.

There were signs that Trump would defer to Republicans in Congress, which could provide an ironic coda for the party he seemed to break into pieces. With control of both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue, the GOP was poised to realize a suite of once distant dreams: the potential for a new conservative majority on the Supreme Court, a repeal of all or part of Obamacare, dramatic reductions in tax rates, new military funding, an enhanced enforcement of immigration law and a historic rollback in environmental regulations. "He just earned a mandate, and we now have a Republican unified government," Ryan said on November 9.

The candidate many Republican leaders once could not stomach could become their savior. But only if he chose to. The one thing we knew about the next president was that he would run much of the government, and the nation's relationship with the rest of the world, exactly as he pleased. ▯

THE COMBATANT

SURVIVING AND THRIVING

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Despite impeachments and the assault on the Capitol following his 2020 loss, the pugnacious politician managed to keep supporters believing in his cause.

In February 2024 in Rock Hill, South Carolina, Trump urged the faithful to show up at the polls.

REPELLING MUELLER

The end of the special counsel's probe gave Donald Trump one of the biggest wins of his presidency.

BY BRIAN BENNETT

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP HAD just finished a round of Sunday golf and repaired to his private quarters at his Palm Beach, Florida, club when the news arrived. After 22 months, the findings of special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation were in.

Moments before, around 3 p.m. on March 24, 2019, Trump's White House lawyer, Emmet Flood, had received a call from attorney general William Barr's chief of staff, Brian Rabbitt. The Department of Justice official said that after more than 2,800 subpoenas, nearly 500 search warrants and a similar number of witness interviews, Mueller had not established that the Trump campaign or its associates had conspired with Russia during the 2016 election. In addition, Mueller declined to draw a conclusion about whether Trump had obstructed justice in the aftermath. Barr and deputy attorney general Rod Rosenstein immediately cleared the president.

Aides were elated. "This is very good," Trump said, according to an official who was present. At the White House, staff crowded into press secretary Sarah Sanders's office to toast the result with a bottle of sparkling wine. Within hours, Trump's 2020 campaign was making money off the news, texting supporters that Democrats had "raised millions off a lie." Greeting reporters on a Florida tarmac, Trump

Opponents who had looked forward to "Mueller time" were disappointed with the prosecutor's final report.

Report On The Investigation Into Russian Interference In The 2016 Presidential Election

Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller, III

Submitted Pursuant to 28 C.F.R. § 600.8(c)

Washington, D.C.

March 2019

claimed "complete and total exoneration."

It was one of the biggest victories of the Trump presidency. No collusion, no obstruction—just as Trump had vowed. A special counsel investigation of this ilk might have proven fatal to Trump's predecessors, yet the president survived it, stiff-arming Mueller's demands for an in-person interview and attacking the legitimacy of the special counsel to stir up his supporters. By the time Trump sat down for a chicken piccata lunch with GOP senators two days later, he was also savoring the victory. Trump was "exuberant," recalled Republican senator Mike Braun of Indiana. "It's apparent that it's a big weight lifted."

Mueller's verdict was not nearly as definitive as the president and his allies would claim. He did not clear Trump of obstruction, according to a summary of the report Barr sent to Congress. Mueller laid out evidence on both sides, noted the "difficult issues" involved and declined to render a judgment, instead leaving the decision to DOJ brass. As Barr wrote, "The special counsel states that 'while this report does not conclude that the president committed a crime, it also does not exonerate him.'" (Indeed, that fact irked Trump when he first heard it, according to a White House official.)

THE MOST IMPORTANT RESULT OF THE INVESTIGATION MAY HAVE BEEN TO INOCULATE TRUMP AGAINST THE PROBES STILL TO COME.

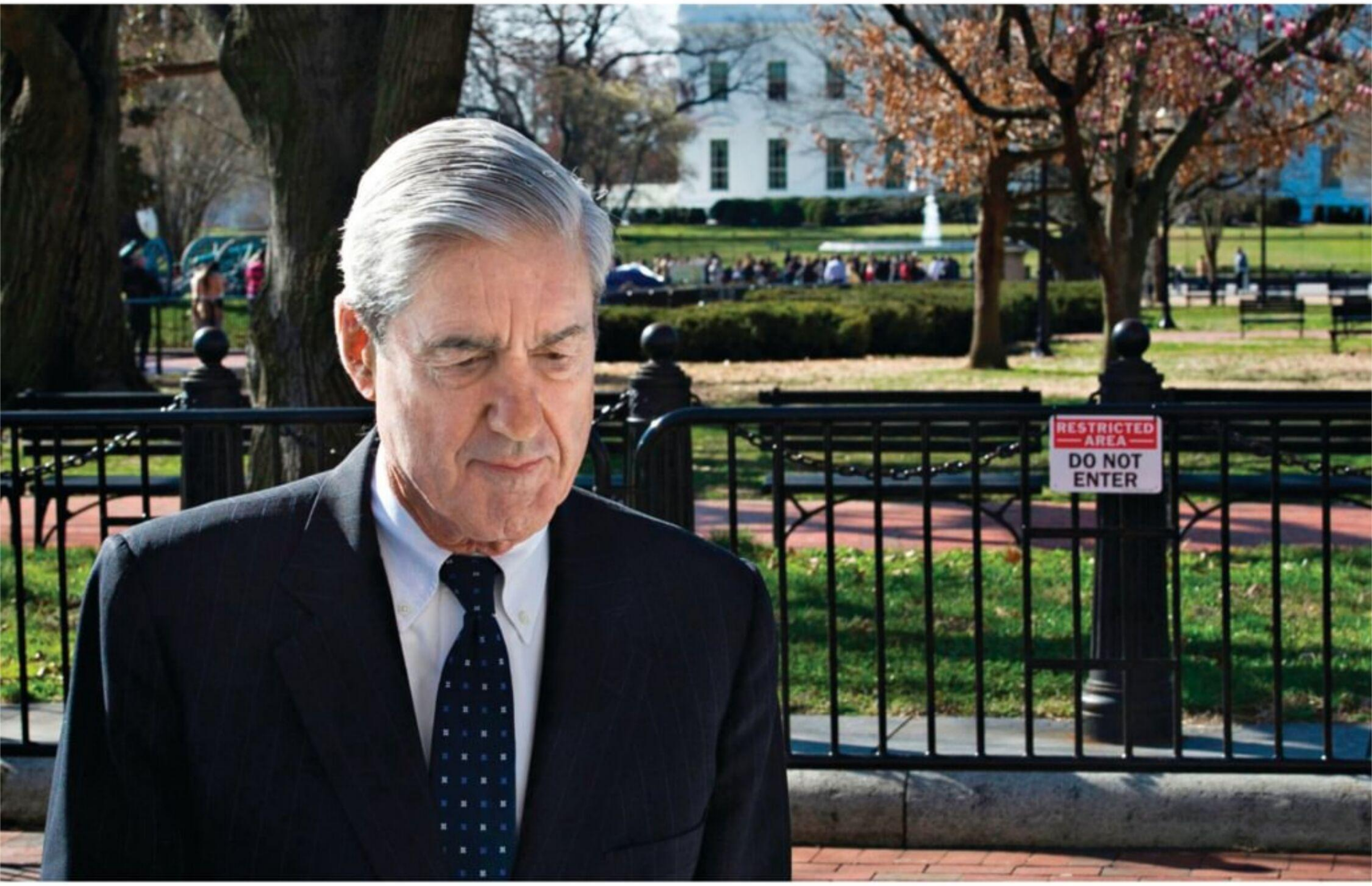
MUELLER FOUND THAT Russia had mounted an unprecedented campaign to influence the 2016 election, spreading disinformation on social media, hacking Democratic computers and engineering the release of damaging emails in an effort to sow discord and help Trump win. The special counsel indicted 34 people and won seven convictions or guilty pleas, including from Trump's former campaign chairman, his deputy campaign manager, his White House national security advisor and his longtime personal lawyer. By any historical measure, the Trump presidency remains extraordinarily scandal-scarred.

Which is why the most important result of the Mueller report may have been to politically inoculate Trump against the probes still to come. America saw Trump weather a massive investigation led by a widely respected prosecutor. Somehow, Trump turned what might have been a catastrophe for any other president—a sweeping inquiry into potential collusion with a foreign power to undermine U.S. democracy—into a rebuttal against whatever came next. "The politics of what's happened over the last few days just places the president in a much better political position than he probably could have imagined," said Russell Riley, a professor of presidential studies at the University of Virginia.

Mueller's findings mattered in no small part because of what his investigation came to represent. For Democrats and many disenchanted Republicans, the special counsel evolved into a symbol of the rule of law itself. His investigation dominated social media and cable news, and his likeness spawned a cottage industry, with Trump's opponents snapping up prayer candles, action figures and mugs emblazoned with the words IT'S MUELLER TIME.

The former FBI director's reputation was one reason congressional Democrats were willing to pin so much on the outcome of his investigation. When asked about the Russia investigation, Democrats typically said they would reserve judgment until Mueller completed his work. Now that he had, it was harder for them to quibble with the conclusions. "You can't on the one hand defer to Mueller and also say, 'Now that we have it, we want to replow that ground,'" said Stanley Brand, former counsel for the House of Representatives under Democratic speaker Tip O'Neill.

Some of the Democrats calling for Trump's impeachment had long been wary of staking too much on Mueller's findings. Tom Steyer, the liberal California billionaire who had committed nearly $100 million toward a pro-impeachment campaign, said he never thought the report would actually move the needle. Waiting for the report,



Robert Mueller was denied a request to interview Trump and was regularly attacked by the president.

Steyer told TIME in February 2019, would be "a very ill-considered and mistaken idea."

While Democrats were building up the import of the Russia investigation, Trump, after months of cooperation, decided to aggressively criticize Mueller. Those rants showed Trump following his instinct to lash out when he feels under attack. Once he started, Trump hammered at the investigation's legitimacy incessantly. (In total, he tweeted 181 times that the probe was a "witch hunt.") Many of the president's detractors snorted at the broadsides, dismissing them as the ravings of a cornered man. But there was power in the mayhem. The president's campaign to discredit the decorated former Marine and lifelong Republican as a rogue prosecutor seemed to have had a real effect. Over time, Trump was able to convince supporters that a meticulous inquiry was politically motivated, and the public's views became more and more entrenched along party lines.

Trump's criticism would continue to pay off as the 2020 election neared, predicted former White House deputy press secretary Raj Shah. "On a wide range of issues—whether it's the economy, whether it's national security—you're going to have critics fairly or unfairly criticizing the president," Shah said. "And he's going to be able to say on the biggest, most prominent issue, 'They were dead wrong, I was dead right, you should believe me.' And I think that's going to sell."

The fog of the Mueller report transcended pure partisanship. By the end, many Americans had no idea what to make of the sprawling investigation. Some grew convinced that no matter what Mueller found, the outcome wouldn't matter. In the days before Barr released his summary

South Carolina senator Lindsey Graham held up a copy of the Mueller report, which neither exonerated the president nor concluded any criminality.

of Mueller's conclusions, TIME was given access to a series of focus-group sessions convened in Des Moines, Iowa, by the Democratic polling firm GBAO on behalf of a group called Protect the Investigation. The researchers sought to study "soft partisans," people who scored relatively low on an assessment of party loyalty. One panel was made up of college-educated Republicans, one of college-educated independents and one of Democrats without college degrees.

The similarities were striking. The groups shared a sense that the investigation was merited, the matters were serious and it was important that justice be done. They were troubled by the idea that politicians and the privileged might get away with things regular people wouldn't. And yet many of the allegations against Trump didn't strike the participants as a big deal. The prevailing view was that there was a lot of funny business going on around Trump, but that the president had likely found a way to keep his hands clean. "I do think he probably did some stuff, but I'm pretty sure he did a good job insulating himself," said a 35-year-old Republican man.

Strikingly, none of the focus group participants expected the Mueller report to be a game changer. "There may be a lot of pistols, but there probably isn't going to be a smoking gun," a 69-year-old man in the independents group said. Few said the report was likely to alter their opinion of the president.

That seemed to be the case for many Americans: In a national Fox News poll conducted the week before the report was released, 70 percent said there was no chance or only a small chance that the report would change their views. A poll by Morning Consult and Politico conducted in the two days following the release of Barr's summary found the president's support was essentially unchanged from a week earlier.

Hours after Barr revealed Mueller's findings, Trump and his top aides watched TV news coverage in his office on Air Force One. Soon they began to stew. "The mood fluctuated from happiness to righteous anger," recalled White House spokesperson Hogan Gidley. "There was a lot of relief, but there were definitely a lot of questions."

White House officials were hungry to press ahead. They wanted to use the momentum to push

The report's ambiguities gave Trump the opportunity to claim victory.

Trump's policy agenda forward, with legislative initiatives on health care, trade and infrastructure, according to two West Wing aides. Trump's liaisons to Capitol Hill said they hoped to work with House Democrats on key committees willing to work with them, especially on legislation to repair the country's aging network of highways and bridges.

YET THE WHITE HOUSE knew there was little chance of big bipartisan legislation getting through. "There were Democrats who wanted to work with us and Democrats who didn't, and I don't think that's really changed," said a top White House official.

How lasting Trump's victory would prove would depend on a host of factors. Trump campaign officials believed the end of the investigation created an opening with independent voters. Yet Trump seemed focused more on exacting vengeance against Democrats and the media than on any attempt at reconciliation.

Mueller's conclusions tamped down talk of impeachment on this matter among Democratic leaders, who were already wary of publicly embracing the idea. But House Democrats had no plans to let up on their probes of the president, his administration, his family members or their business dealings with foreign powers. They were already pushing Barr to release the full Mueller report and its underlying documents, as well as to continue investigating other Trump controversies.

The outcome of Robert Mueller's investigation was as disappointing for Democrats as it was buoying for Republicans. But in the end, it may have been a boon for U.S. democracy. For nearly two years, the fate of the Trump presidency had been bound up in a rare and opaque legal limbo. Mueller may have punted the question of whether Trump obstructed justice to the president's handpicked attorney general. But in the process, he returned the power to render a verdict on the Trump presidency to American voters. The final report would come at the ballot box on November 3, 2020. ▯

—With reporting by Alana Abramson, Molly Ball and Tessa Berenson/Washington and Charlotte Alter/New York

PROSPERING DURING IMPEACHMENT

In 2019, by uniting his followers against his political enemies, the Trump team turned a threat to his presidency into a fundraising bonanza.

BY BRIAN BENNETT AND CHRIS WILSON

First published December 16, 2019

Trump's fans showed that they stood with the president when they thronged to a rally in Monroe, Louisiana, weeks after his 2019 impeachment inquiry began.

ON STAGE IN THE PACKED, THUNderous hockey arena in Sunrise, Florida, President Donald Trump's campaign manager Brad Parscale urges the crowd to pull out their phones and text themselves onto the campaign's contact list. Their phones are key to helping Trump get reelected in the face of his likely impeachment by the House. "The way we fight back," Parscale booms, "is to get online ourselves and get connected, sign up for emails." A slap shot away from Parscale, voter Alan Huber doesn't need to sign up. He is already connected and gets Trump campaign messages, most often by scrolling through Facebook. "I don't have to watch Fox or CNN or read TIME or anything else. I will get anything important from my Facebook feed," says Huber, who's in his 60s and drove down the Florida coast from Boynton Beach on November 26, 2019, to see Trump in person. "I think the media doesn't fully appreciate the power of the Facebook feed."

The Trump campaign does. In the weeks since House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's September 24 decision to launch a formal impeachment inquiry against Trump for using the power of his presidency to press a foreign country—Ukraine—to investigate a political rival, the Trump campaign hasn't run from the impeachment push or settled into a defensive crouch. Campaign officials instead are leaning into the threat, using it to mobilize supporters and try to extract a political price—and millions of dollars in fundraising—from the Democrats' move. One of the single most powerful weapons in the Trump campaign's arsenal has been Facebook, which—unlike many TV stations and newspapers—does not monitor candidates' political ads for veracity.

A TIME analysis of publicly available Facebook data, which included the cataloging of hundreds of distinct messages, shows how Trump is using social media to supercharge his pushback against impeachment and add to his considerable $150 million war chest. Ads that many Americans would otherwise never see have been tested and tailored to solicit responses from older voters, deploying Trump's distinctive use of capital letters and words like "scam" and "witch hunt."

Pelosi's announcement came on a Tuesday. By the end of that week, the campaign had spent more on Facebook ads than in any week since Facebook began reporting political ad spending in May 2018, topping both the aftermath of special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation and the massive push in the run-up to the 2018 midterm elections. In the weeks since, the Trump campaign has paid Facebook more than $5.4 million for ad placements, generating well over 100 million appearances on user feeds.

The spending may be paying for itself. Within 72 hours of Pelosi's announcement, the Trump campaign had raised $15 million in small-dollar donations ($200 or under). On a typical day, it raises approximately half a million in small-dollar donations. On October 31, the day the House voted to approve rules for the impeachment inquiry, the campaign raised more than $3 million, around six times the norm, a senior campaign official told TIME.

Which means that even as White House lawyers have been outwardly blocking access to documents and officials and dismissing the House's work as illegitimate, the Trump campaign has embraced impeachment as a means of rallying support and donations in an extraordinarily aggressive Facebook campaign that sometimes includes Instagram—which is owned by Facebook—and that is augmented by spending on Google and other digital platforms. TIME's analysis shows that about two thirds of the spending goes to ads that either explicitly mention impeachment or unambiguously allude to the House investigation.

The sheer volume of the Trump campaign's presence on social media and the money behind it mean that for a substantial number of Americans who thumb through Facebook for personal and national news, the campaign stands a good chance of actually delivering its version of events, no matter the reality. "The campaign has done a good job of telling us what the news is in case we don't see it on Fox," Huber says.

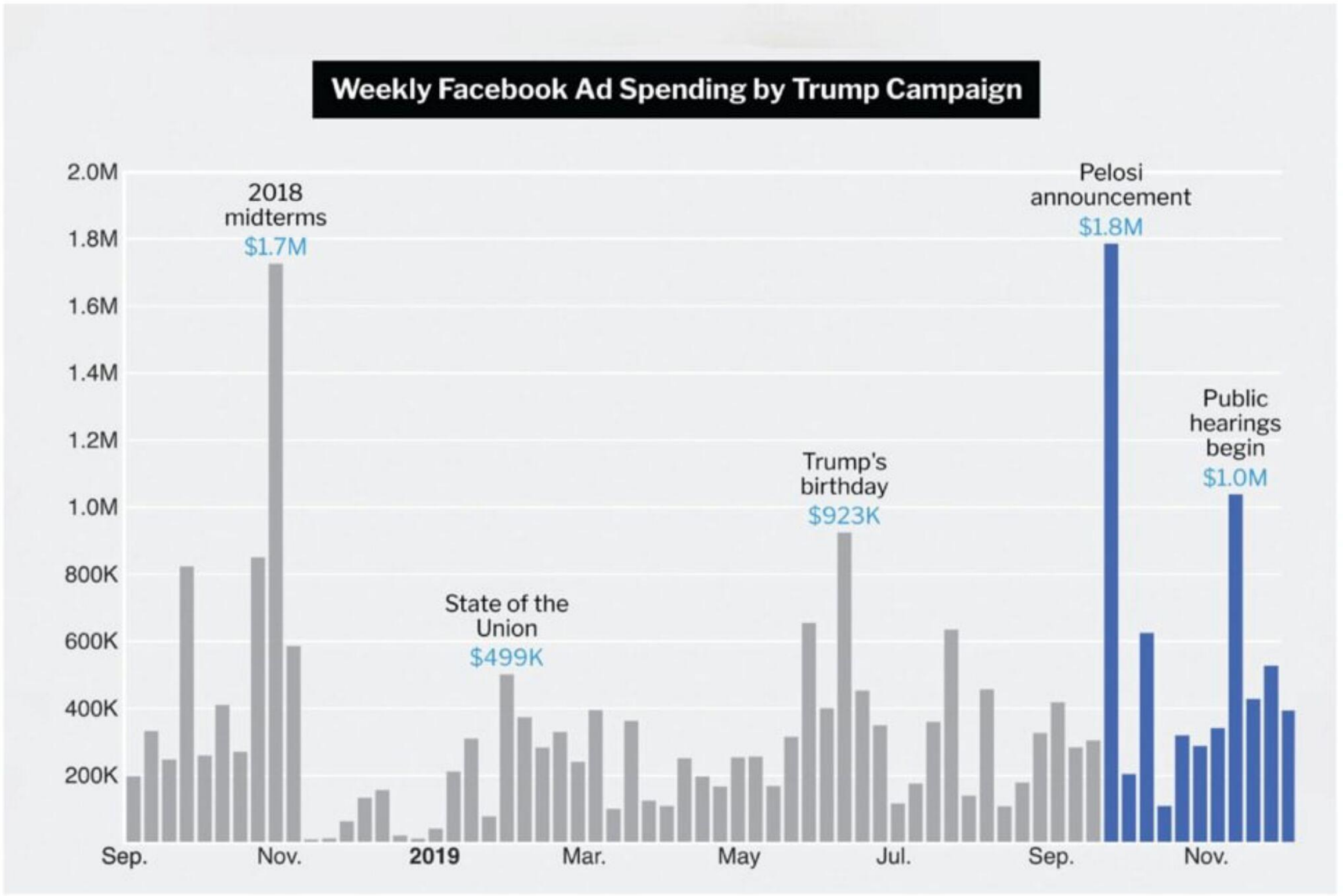
That raises issues. Trump is using the fallout from impeachment to reach more voters and donors on a platform that's come under fire for being a tool of election meddling, especially after Russia used Facebook and other social media platforms to stir up animosity, spread falsehoods and organize real-life protests against Hillary Clinton in 2016. A Facebook spokesperson did not want to comment in depth but noted that Democratic candidates have also invested heavily in advertising on the platform. Facebook advertising data shows Trump has spent $16.2 million on Facebook so far in 2019. That compares with $14.2 million spent by Tom Steyer,

Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi announced the formal impeachment inquiry on September 24, 2019.

$5.9 million by Pete Buttigieg, $4.9 million by Elizabeth Warren, $4.8 million by Bernie Sanders and $3.1 million by Joe Biden.

From the White House, Jared Kushner has been convening meetings to coordinate the messaging on impeachment between the White House, the campaign and Congress. A tight group made up of Kushner, Parscale, Republican National Committee chair Ronna McDaniel and House minority leader Kevin McCarthy have decided to try to play impeachment to Trump's advantage, launching a campaign to stonewall Congress and to paint the process as partisan and unfair to Trump—and to voters. They believe the impeachment helps the GOP's chances of winning back the House by putting the squeeze on Democrats who won in the 31 districts that went for Trump in 2016, says a senior Trump aide. "When this first happened, people were running around with their hair on fire saying, 'He's gonna be impeached!'" the aide says. "They can be tough, but we can be tougher. They keep making up their own rules because Trump is not natural to Washington. And then when we break the rules back, they get incensed by it."

That's not to say Trump wasn't furious he was being impeached. Trump hates having the *I* word attached to his legacy. But since it has become all but inevitable that the House will vote to impeach him, even if the GOP-controlled Senate keeps him in office, his campaign has kicked into gear to use the issue. When impeachment news is "whipped up into a frenzy," campaign officials see a dramatic spike in small-dollar donations, in people clicking on Trump ads and in voter data collected, the campaign's director of communications Tim Murtaugh tells TIME. "Every time this happens, the president's campaign gets bigger and stronger," Murtaugh claims.



Trump's team fought fire with a flurry of online ads during key points in the impeachment process in 2019.

National polls don't quite back that up, and Democrats have gambled that a high-wattage impeachment trial in the Senate will dampen enthusiasm for the president, ramp up Democratic voter turnout in 2020 and damage Trump's reelection chances.

Across the country, public support for impeachment is about 5 points higher than opposition in most polls. If anything, polls indicate that Republicans and Democrats have dug deeper into a stalemate over impeachment. Following a small dip after the impeachment investigation began in late September, Trump's job approval has remained virtually unchanged since summer. Gallup polling in the first two weeks of November found that 43 percent of Americans approve of Trump, identical to his standing before Pelosi's announcement.

When Trump took the stage in Sunrise, he did not avoid the topic. He accused the "radical-left Democrats" of being "maniacs" pushing "deranged impeachment" and "trying to rip our nation apart." He said his support is going up because "people don't like watching a scam." Then Trump reached for a line campaign officials believe will take the Democrats' momentum on impeachment and turn it in Trump's favor. "The failed Washington establishment," he said, "is trying to stop me because I'm fighting for you."

Trump's weaponizing of social media is well known. But interviews with senior Trump campaign staff and TIME's analysis of more than 325,000 Facebook ad buys lifts the veil on just how Trump has used that weapon since the impeachment kicked off. The first wave came during the 28 minutes after Pelosi stepped out of her office at the Capitol and stated that the House would pursue its authority of "the utmost gravity: approval of articles of impeachment." The time was 5:04 p.m. Four minutes later, shortly after Pelosi had left the podium, Trump responded on Twitter, calling it "Witch Hunt garbage."

And less than 30 seconds after that tweet, the president's reelection campaign unleashed a flood of paid Facebook advertising with a defiant message: "The only thing stopping Democrats from carrying out their impeachment Witch Hunt is Patriotic Americans standing with President Trump."

Over the course of 20 minutes, the campaign spent an estimated $100,000 to target the ad to an estimated 2 million Facebook accounts, hitting every state but weighting the target audience more heavily than usual toward the 45-and-over crowd—the group that according to 2016 exit polls was more likely to support Trump than Clinton. Above photos or videos depicting Trump or his Democratic rivals, viewers were encouraged, in all caps, to DONATE TO THE OFFICIAL IMPEACHMENT DEFENSE FUND NOW!, which, if clicked, led to a generic campaign-donation page.

Three days later, the Democratic committees charged with the impeachment investigation issued their first subpoena of the inquiry to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. By that morning, September 27, the campaign had purchased roughly $1.3 million in ads to be displayed at least 15 million times and was well on its way to outpacing the previous most-expensive week in the past 18 months, when it carpeted Facebook with ads supporting Republicans in the midterm elections. (Weekly figures may grow higher because daily reported expenditures tend to lag in reporting.)

The vast majority of ads mimic, to an almost uncanny degree, the president's distinct wordsmithing on Twitter, down to the frequent capitalization of words or sentences, the vitriol and the uncharitable nicknames for political foes. Beginning on November 13, the first day of open hearings in the investigation, the campaign unleashed a set of ads stating, "The Impeachment Scam hearings begin today! This is a complete Fake Hearing to interview Never Trumpers and a Pelosi-Schiff SCAM against the Republican Party and me."

When a user shares an ad, it still appears as Trump-sponsored content on the original user's feed, but not on the feed of the Facebook friend viewing the shared post. And unlike a campaign designed by an ad agency, these messages are cheap to produce. All you need is a message, some visuals and a call to action.

The messages evolve in almost Darwinian fashion as the campaign field-tests them to see which grab voters. "They're always trying variations of ads, text, pictures—they test everything," a campaign official said. "They test what color of the donate button works best."

Just after Pelosi's announcement, for example, there were two versions of what was otherwise the same fundraising message, nearly word for word. Each stated, "The ONLY thing stopping Democrats from carrying out their impeachment Witch Hunt is Patriotic Americans standing with President Trump," but one kind suggested a $45 donation and the other one did not.

ADS FELL INTO THREE CATEGORIES, SAYING THAT DEMOCRATS WERE AGAINST YOU, TRUMP OR AMERICA.

Each was sent to about 80 different groups. Some were small, targeted ad buys in batches of less than $100. Others were big-ticket purchases that reached hundreds of thousands of users and cost at least $10,000. Both kinds of ads continue to appear, but the one suggesting a $45 donation has been promoted more aggressively. Campaign staff test and write Facebook and other social media messaging from a warren of cubicles on the 14th floor of an Arlington, Virginia, office building and have field-tested several hundred messages since Pelosi's announcement.

Social media companies survive on their ability to allow advertisers to microtarget groups with extraordinary specificity. That's particularly true on platforms like Facebook, where many users volunteer information about everything from their age and marital status to their interests, hobbies and opinions. In a recent *Washington Post* op-ed, Ellen L. Weintraub, the chair of the Federal Election Commission, warned that the ability to home in on a target audience in such detail lets political campaigns "single out sus-

ceptible groups and direct political misinformation to them with little accountability, because the public at large never sees the ad." In March, Facebook addressed some of these concerns with its expanded Ad Library Report, where anyone—including those who do not have Facebook accounts—can browse ads about any topic and see the aggregate spending over time by those who pay for them. For an individual ad campaign, the site reports the percentage of the ad's audience in each state, as well as audience age range and gender. The Ad Library Report provides a range of how much each ad campaign costs and how many times the ad appeared in user feeds, as well as daily breakdowns of a campaign's spending on Facebook ads. From November 1 to December 1 in 2019, the Trump campaign spent $1.97 million on Facebook ads, the report says. By comparing those spending patterns with the appearance of ads, TIME was able to confidently estimate how much the campaign spent for any ad blast.

TIME analyzed hundreds of digital campaign ads and found that nearly all of Trump's Facebook messages about impeachment fit into three categories: "The Democrats Are Against You," "The Democrats Are Against Me" and "The Democrats Are Against America."

The same motifs repeat with such regularity that the messaging plays like 12-bar blues: three dominant chords on repeat, with the occasional substitution. "The Democrats Are Against You" ads frequently warn that Democrats are intent on "silencing" or "intimidating" Trump supporters. "The Democrats Are Against Me" ads are the most apocalyptic, saying things like "The future of American freedom rests on the shoulders of men and women willing to defend it from these hateful impeachment attacks." "The Democrats Are Against America" messages are the most personal and frequently cite Democrats by name. For example: "We need to send a Resounding message to the left that big-government socialists like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Ilhan Omar don't represent the views of the American people!" A small percentage of ads propagate widely debunked stories about collusion between then Vice President Joe Biden and the Ukrainian government, with messages such as, "Joe Biden boasted that as vice president he threatened to withhold $1 billion in foreign aid from Ukraine unless they fired the prosecutor looking into a lucrative contract held by his son, Hunter Biden. Learn the real truth about Democrats!"

With the political trenches getting deeper, the campaign's social media blitz alone is unlikely to persuade new voters to cross over to Trump. And there is probably nothing the Democrats could uncover that would change Diane Edwards's mind about voting for Trump again. Edwards, a retired hairdresser who lives in rural Coin, Iowa, is "sick off all this impeachment crap," adding, "Our country elected him. Everybody has faults, but I think overall he's doing a good job."

"It actually makes me support him more. I don't like what they are doing to him," says Jennifer Csaszar, 49, who attended Trump's recent Florida rally from nearby Boca Raton with a friend. "I want to know what the Bidens did."

"IT ACTUALLY MAKES ME SUPPORT HIM MORE," SAID ONE TRUMP RALLY ATTENDEE. "I DON'T LIKE WHAT THEY ARE DOING TO HIM."

When Democrats first announced the inquiry, they knew amassing the bipartisan support needed for a conviction would be a long shot. But they held out hope that if irrefutable evidence emerged showing the president dangled foreign assistance to the new Ukrainian government as leverage for an investigation into Biden and his family, some Republicans would deem it impeachable. That hasn't happened.

Consider Carol and Rodney Smith of Thomasville, North Carolina. Carol has been glued to the impeachment hearings and screams at the television a lot, she says, sitting with her husband at a Winston-Salem chicken-stew Republican fundraiser in late November. "The Democrats are trying to crucify him," Carol says, adding that she doesn't

Donald J. Trump
Sponsored • Paid for by Donald J. Trump for President, Inc.
ID: 474380013407296
The ONLY thing stopping Democrats from carrying out their impeachment WITCH HUNT is Patriotic Americans standing with President Trump.
Please contribute $45 to the Official Impeachment Defense Fund NOW and joi...

Ads like this one flooded Facebook immediately after Pelosi's impeachment announcement.

think Trump's done "anything that former presidents haven't done at some point in time." Rodney, a pastor at a Baptist church who doesn't affiliate with a political party, also doesn't think Trump's actions justify removing him from office. "I'm not saying what he did was right. I just don't think it's impeachable," he says.

THE ENTIRE IMPEACHMENT exercise "has pushed people into their corners, and now you've got the jerseys on," says David Kochel, a Republican strategist. "Republicans are putting on the red jersey, Democrats are putting on the blue jersey, and it's kind of a polarizing time."

But Trump is resoundingly popular among Republicans, and it is this core strength of support that props up the Republican firewall in the Senate—making it politically risky for any senator to come out against the sitting president. Majority leader Mitch McConnell, one of the sharpest tacticians in the history of the Republican Party, has told his conference to pick one consistent reason to oppose impeachment—be it Democrats' motives, legislative process or judicial fairness—and stick with it. In poll after poll, GOP voters have rejected impeachment, and McConnell's insiders say that as long as that number remains above 85 percent, Republicans' majority of 53 seats can be preserved—making it very unlikely Trump will be removed from office.

"Abandoning the president is political suicide," says Matt Beynon, a Republican strategist who worked on Rick Santorum's bids for the White House in 2012 and 2016. "You're going to get tied to the president no matter what. You're on the ticket with him. If you abandon him, all you're going to do is infuriate the base. And that's a very powerful base."

There's even a growing feeling in Trump's inner circle that he may emerge from the impeachment process stronger, similar to when he survived the long-anticipated Mueller report. Coming out the other side, his aides argue, would further strengthen support among Trump's base and weaken future attempts to undermine him.

At the beginning of Trump's rally in Sunrise, pastor Mario Bramnick delivered a prayer that echoed the campaign's strategy to use the impeachment as a weapon, likening it to a "demonic storm" that was "coming to try to destroy our nation." "That which the enemy has designed against our president—and to stop God's plan for our nation through him—must cease and desist," Bramnick, who was introduced as a member of the advisory board of Latinos for Trump, told the thousands of Trump supporters, many with their heads bowed. "I declare what the enemy meant for evil, God turn around for good." ☐

—With reporting by Alana Abramson and Philip Elliott/Washington and Lissandra Villa/Clarinda, Iowa

BEATING THE CHARGES

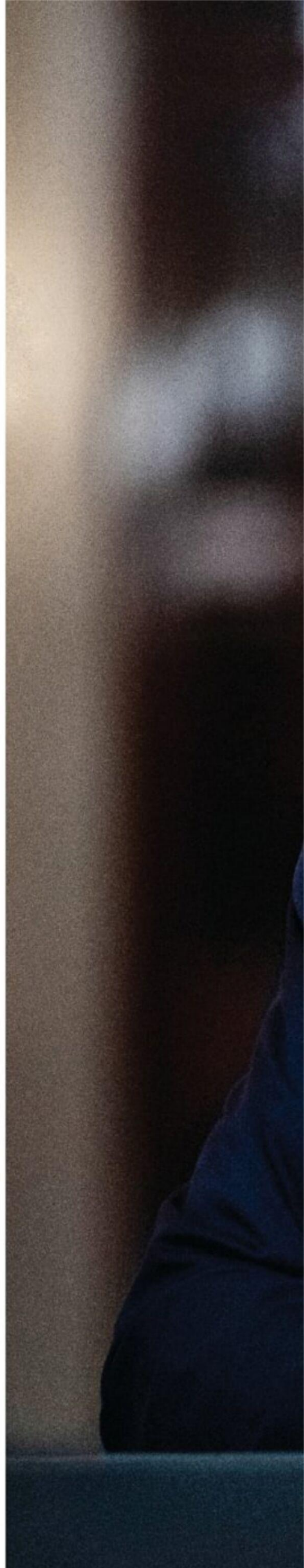
The House claimed that Trump had abused his power. The Senate gave him a pass.

BY BRIAN BENNETT

PRESIDENT TRUMP WAS VISIBLY delighted. As he took the stage at the annual National Prayer Breakfast in Washington on February 6, 2020, his eye was drawn to newspapers laid out on a long table by the lectern. He picked up a copy of *USA Today* and held it up. "Acquitted," read the headline. Then, with the architect of his impeachment—House Speaker Nancy Pelosi—standing nearby, he grabbed a copy of the *Washington Post* and popped his eyes in mock surprise at the typeset: "Trump Acquitted."

Trump held up the same newsprint in the East Room of the White House when he crowed about his acquittal to reporters three hours later at the start of a rambling, celebratory speech that painted his impeachment as part of a long arc of efforts to try to oust him, going back to the FBI's investigation into Russia's effort to help Trump win the 2016 election. "It was evil. It was corrupt. It was dirty cops. It was leakers and liars. And this should never ever happen to another president ever," Trump said.

Trump's acquittal was a moment that many in Washington talked about as the inevitable outcome of the impeachment process once the evidence the House managers had gathered hit the political



Speaking to reporters in the East Room of the White House, Trump celebrated the vote that ended the impeachment process. "It was evil," he said. "It was corrupt."

The Washington Post
Trump acquitted

realities of the GOP-controlled Senate. But inside Trump's inner circle, it wasn't always clear that the president would be able to contain the drumbeat of negative headlines and keep Republicans on board for the long months from Pelosi's announcement of the inquiry on September 24, 2019, to Trump's acquittal on February 5, 2020.

Here are the three main ways Trump managed to land the acquittal, according to conversations with multiple White House officials, people close to Trump, political strategists and experts on presidential history.

TRUMP STONEWALLED THE HOUSE

It was an audacious move. After Trump's legal team decided to release the record of Trump's July 25, 2019, call with Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, the White House pulled up the drawbridge and refused to cooperate with any House investigations into Trump's demands of Ukraine. White House counsel Pat Cipollone's scathing October 8 letter to House leaders called the impeachment inquiry "constitutionally invalid" and refused to provide any documents or firsthand witnesses.

That turned out to be strategically crucial, limiting House Democrats' access to firsthand information. It also set a new precedent for outsize use of presidential power. "Donald Trump is the first president ever to put up a complete stonewall and obstruct the work of a House impeachment inquiry," said Timothy Naftali, a presidential historian at New York University and a former director of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum. "All his predecessors understood there was something very unique about an impeachment inquiry. This one didn't."

How Trump would fight the impeachment took time to come into focus. Early in the fall, as news first broke about Trump's request that Ukraine investigate the Bidens, some close to the president panicked. Immediately, factions inside the West Wing butted heads over how to respond.

One camp, led by Cipollone, advocated for sticking with the West Wing's legal team and not building out a war room of outside lawyers.

Another group around acting chief of staff Mick Mulvaney thought Cipollone, an accomplished civil litigator with limited political experience, was out of his depth and needed more help herding the tribal factions on the Hill and managing the press.

Things got so bad that at one point in the fall, there were two separate morning meetings about impeachment strategy being held in the West Wing, one headed by Cipollone and another in Mulvaney's office. The two camps weren't working together, according to three White House officials who described the discussions. The tensions came to a head when Mulvaney, during a disastrous press conference in October, seemed to acknowledge that Trump withheld military aid to Ukraine to apply pressure for investigations—a central question in the impeachment inquiry.

As tempers flared, Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser Jared Kushner ushered in a compromise: The legal team would still report to Cipollone, and no massive outside operation would be launched to defend Trump, but a few people would be brought in temporarily to help. The new additions included Pam Bondi, a former attorney general of Florida, who helped craft the communications response and with the care and feeding of conservative media.

"It's invaluable to do that," said a White House official, referring to having enough aides to talk regularly with GOP lawmakers and conservative pundits. "Otherwise you're just over here doing bunker-mentality-type stuff, and people aren't hearing from you."

REPUBLICANS STUCK TOGETHER

The impeachment proceedings didn't eat into Trump's popularity among Republicans. In fact, the Gallup polling found Trump's approval among Republican voters ticked up by six points over the month of January 2020, rising to 94 percent.

With that number came power. Trump's allies had made it clear that breaking with Trump would come with a political price. After Mitt Romney became the only Republican senator who voted to convict Trump of abuse of power, Trump's son Don Jr. tweeted that Romney was "now officially a member of the resistance & should be expelled from the @GOP."

Earlier, when the impeachment vote came to the floor of the House on December 18, the White House scrambled to ensure that no Republicans would vote against Trump. White House officials believed Rep. Will Hurd, a moderate Republican from Texas who had served in the CIA, was considering breaking ranks, but Hurd ultimately voted against impeachment.

By the time the impeachment case made it to the

Dershowitz gave a Senate defense (top) while Mulvaney had a press-conference slip.

Senate for trial, Trump told aides he also wanted household names like Ken Starr and Alan Dershowitz defending him, and they came on board to help craft Trump's public defense.

Ultimately, Trump's legal team settled on a three-pronged defense to keep Republicans on board. First, they argued that the entire impeachment was invalid because the House hadn't held a vote before issuing subpoenas.

Trump's lawyers further argued that the House evidence was based on hearsay and conjecture and didn't have enough firsthand accounts to link any wrongdoing to the president himself. House Democrats said they had made their case and that Trump had blocked their attempts to get more direct evidence from eyewitnesses, such as national security advisor John Bolton. On January 26, a report was published that said a draft of Bolton's book claimed Trump directly asked Bolton to cut off aid to Ukraine to pressure them into launching investigations. But without the votes to call Bolton to the Senate floor, Bolton's claims weren't aired.

Finally, Trump's legal team argued that even if Trump had done what the House impeached him for—abuse of power and obstruction of Congress—the actions didn't rise to a level requiring Trump's removal from office. Trump's legal team, especially Dershowitz, leaned on that argument harder after Bolton's allegations came to light. This was the reasoning that Tennessee Sen. Lamar Alexander, who at one point was thought to have been a possible defector, gave for his decision not to vote for witnesses in the trial. Ultimately, only two Republicans—Romney of Utah and Sen. Susan Collins of Maine—voted in favor of calling witnesses.

"Let's face it, they never found a smoking gun, they never had a blue dress," said a White House official. "And as much as you think the president did something wrong or that he was directing this and behind that, until you have solid evidence, how are you supposed to take the guy off the ballot and remove him from office?"

IN THE END, VOTERS WERE UNMOVED

When the House went through the process of building the impeachment case, its members were unable to convince enough of the public that Trump should be removed, which would have compelled the Senate to vote differently. Throughout the fall, polls showed that slightly less than half of Americans thought Trump should be removed from office. Even as Democrats built their case and more information became public, those numbers did not inch up, despite Trump's low approval ratings. Instead, Americans' views of Trump became even more entrenched.

"They didn't create the critical mass they would need to get a conviction," said David Winston, a longtime Republican strategist and pollster. Winston estimated that more than 60 percent of the public would have to support removing a president from office for a Senate to vote to convict. This was by design, he explained. The founders, by requiring two-thirds of the Senate to agree to remove the president, intentionally wanted there to be an overwhelming amount of public support for the drastic move.

"They never moved the needle at all," said Winston. "It became purely Democrats wanting to get rid of a Republican president." ▯

RESHAPING THE COURTS

The inside story of how Trump placed his stamp on the judiciary system, which was perhaps the most lasting impact of his first term in office.

BY TESSA BERENSON ROGERS

A FEW DAYS AFTER DONALD TRUMP was elected president in November 2016, Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell placed a call to incoming White House counsel Don McGahn. McConnell knew that Trump had a chance to change the ideological makeup of the federal court system in a way not seen since the Reagan era, but only if McConnell and McGahn could get him to tighten up a disorderly political operation—and fast. "I said, 'Don, we've got an opportunity here to have a huge long-term impact on the country,'" McConnell recalled, sitting in a cushioned chair in his Capitol office. He made McGahn a promise to move qualified judges through the Senate confirmation process as quickly as the White House could send them.

The conversation launched what may prove to be the most important legacy of the Trump presidency. Amid the dramatic infighting, global feuds and impulsive tweets that marked the president's first year, Trump, McConnell and a group of ambitious conservative lawyers set in motion an enormous effort to reshape the federal judiciary. Much

Trump's first major judicial appointment, Neil Gorsuch, was sworn in to the Supreme Court by Justice Anthony Kennedy on April 10, 2017. Trump's three Supreme Court appointees voted for many landmark decisions, including the overturning of Roe v. Wade in 2022.

of the attention understandably went to the Supreme Court. During his first term, Trump nominated three justices—Neil Gorsuch (2017), Brett Kavanaugh (2018) and Amy Coney Barrett (2020)—and that trio would prove instrumental in the court's landmark decision in 2022 to overturn Roe v. Wade. But the impact was even broader than that. Trump's team helped get a record-breaking 12 appeals court judges confirmed during his first year, four times as many as President Obama did in the same time frame. During his first term Trump had 231 federal judges confirmed by the Republican-led Senate. "We're filling up the courts with really talented people who understand and read the Constitution for what it says," Trump told TIME. "It's already having a tremendous impact. These appointments are going to be one of the most important things, if not the most important thing, we do."

The judges Trump picked were on the whole smart, experienced and conservative. The American Bar Association evaluated 258 of his nominees and rated 181 as well qualified and 67 as qualified. They are mostly white and male, and several spurred controversy with their comments about hot political and social debates. On the bench, their views will shape a sweeping array of issues. Conservative judges tend to be sympathetic to claims about gun rights, religious freedom and free speech. During his time on the 10th Circuit, for example, Supreme Court Justice Gorsuch ruled on a landmark case that involved the craft store chain Hobby Lobby, finding that it had a right not to provide birth-control coverage to employees for religious reasons. At the same time, the judges who Trump's team favored tended to be skeptical about abortion rights and workplace and environmental protections. Shortly after Barrett had been confirmed for the Seventh Court of Appeals back in October 2017, she joined a decision refusing to hear a workplace racial-segregation case.

TRUMP GRASPED HOW BENEFICIAL HIS CAMPAIGN PARTNERSHIP WITH CONSERVATIVE COURT WATCHERS HAD BEEN.

SINCE THE VAST majority of cases never make it to the Supreme Court, these life-tenured judges will be the final authority on some of the most controversial issues in American life. Many of the early nominees replaced Republican-appointed jurists, but the balance shifted over the course of Trump's first term. Filling the bench was a project whose impact will accrete slowly, one decision at a time, by judges who hold their jobs for decades. "They will way outlast most of us," said Sen. Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut, a Democrat on the Senate Judiciary Committee.

This plan to change America for generations didn't happen by chance. Trump's team created a streamlined process in the White House and Senate that maximized the opportunity he was handed. They razed congressional customs and carefully nurtured the relationship between the president and conservative legal scholars. In the process, McConnell, McGahn and a group of advisers unclogged the judicial pipeline, pushing nominees onto the courts faster than ever before. The result, McConnell believed, could be Trump's most consequential bequest. "The tax bill was hugely important, but as soon as the government changes, believe me, they'll revisit the tax code," McConnell told TIME. "The impact that this administration could have on the courts is the most long-lasting impact we could have."

The first test for Trump's judicial strategy came almost a year before he first moved into the West Wing. On February 13, 2016, early in Trump's fight to win the Republican nomination, Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia died in his sleep during a hunting trip at a luxury ranch in Texas. That afternoon, Trump campaign aide Stephen Miller called an associate of Leonard Leo, executive vice president of the Federalist Society, an influential conservative group. A Republican debate was scheduled for that evening, and Leo said Miller wanted his advice on how to talk about Scalia's death. "That was the first inkling," Leo recalled, that Trump—a former pro-choice Democrat whose closest connection to the conservative judicial network was through his sister, Maryanne Trump Barry, who sat on the Third Circuit—could be an ally on the courts.

Don McGahn (left), White House counsel through October 2018, guided Trump's court selections.

Trump and Leo built an unlikely alliance that would benefit both the politician and the legal doyen. In March 2016, they hatched a plan to release a list of conservative judges that Trump promised to pick from to replace Scalia. The unusual maneuver, orchestrated by McGahn, helped persuade some skittish Republicans to vote for Trump while easing the fears of the party in Congress. The list "comfort[ed] a lot of my members that he might appoint these kinds of people," McConnell said, "given his own background, which was far from, shall I say, ideologically consistent."

When Trump defeated Hillary Clinton to win the presidency in November 2016, the winnowing of the list kicked into high gear. One week after the election, around the same time as McConnell's call, Leo gathered with Trump, McGahn and other advisers in the president-elect's office on the 26th floor of Trump Tower. Leo, direct and bespectacled, began teaching Trump about the subject he'd spent his life following. "I don't think he necessarily knew how many judges he was going to be able to appoint," Leo recalled. "One of our jobs was to make it clear to him that this was going to be a pretty massive enterprise."

LEO SHARED SOME of the same concerns as McConnell. In order for Trump to seize the huge opening on the courts, things would have to be different than they were during his slapdash campaign. In transition meetings with Trump, Leo said, he stressed "the importance of maintaining some degree of order." If there were any topic unlikely to capture the mercurial boss's attention, it might be granular discussions about conservative judicial prospects.

But Trump's interest had already been piqued in a classically Trumpian way: He noticed the polls. By the time he was elected president, Trump grasped how beneficial his campaign partnership with conservative court watchers had been. National exit polls showed that 21 percent of voters said the Supreme Court appointment was "the most important factor" in their decision, and those voters strongly favored Trump. He knew he had to deliver quickly. "He made such a big deal out of it," Republican Senate Judiciary Committee chairman Chuck Grassley said. "He couldn't have reneged."

Just over a week after he took the oath of office, Trump nominated Gorsuch, a widely respected conservative from Colorado, to fill Scalia's seat. Gorsuch would become a crucial test case for the judicial-confirmation strategy that Trump's team had set up. And it worked. About two months later, with Leo consulting, McGahn running the operation and Senate Republicans ready to carry him over the finish line, Gorsuch was confirmed to the nation's highest court. In contrast to the turmoil elsewhere in the opening months of the Trump administration, the process was smooth and effective.

"It's bizarre to have the Supreme Court nominee be your practice for [judicial nominations], but that was effectively his first shot," said Carrie Severino, head of the conservative Judicial Crisis Network. Once Gorsuch was confirmed, the legal team's focus shifted, Severino said, to the next challenge: "Now let's fill up the lower courts."

After the Gorsuch win, attention turned to the daunting project of filling the rest of the judicial vacancies. The Trump administration was able to confirm some two dozen federal judges in 12 short months for two main reasons. First, McGahn's office ran a tighter ship than past administrations.

McGahn and his staff received input on names from outside advisers, such as local lawyers, governors and state attorneys general. "You want all the information you can get," said an administration official. The Federalist Society and the Office of the Vice President sometimes offered input, and the White House consulted with senators, according to sources with knowledge of the process. On district courts, the senators held much more sway: They suggested three names, and the counsel's office generally picked from that list. But McGahn's office kept closer control of the process than his predecessors had, cutting out from early decisions other stakeholders within the White House, like the legislative affairs office and political affairs shop.

The other key to the effort's success was McConnell, who had been planning for the opportunity for years. The Kentuckian knew there were few big pieces of legislation Republicans could pass with a slim majority in the Senate. And even those could be undone when the next Democratic administration swept into power. So while others in his party were focused on winning the 2016 presidential race, McConnell quietly blocked judges from being confirmed under Obama, stockpiling vacancies for whoever would become the 45th president.

THE TACTIC MADE Democrats furious—especially McConnell's unprecedented decision to deny a hearing to Merrick Garland, Obama's nominee to fill Scalia's seat. McConnell argued that the confirmation window closes in a president's final year. Some two-thirds of Americans disagreed with that view, according to a CNN/ORC poll in March 2016—including a majority of Republicans. But in the long run, McConnell didn't pay a political price for his obstruction. In fact, the strategy only galvanized the conservative base, who knew a Supreme Court seat was on the line.

McConnell then used Gorsuch's nomination to knock down the final procedural hurdle requiring bipartisan consensus on judgeships. In 2013, Democrats—facing opposition engineered by McConnell—changed Senate rules to allow federal judges to be confirmed with a simple majority, taking away the filibuster, which required 60 votes. But they didn't change the rules on Supreme Court nominees. So when Democrats balked at Gorsuch, McConnell convinced Republicans to scrap the judicial filibuster's remaining vestige. "You couldn't get anybody confirmed" without invoking the so-called nuclear option to break the Gorsuch filibuster, he explains. "Only when that was demonstrated was I able to convince my people to do what we had to do, because we were very critical of [Democrats] for doing it three years before," he said.

Trump's own participation in the selection process varied based on the court. For the first Supreme Court opening, he personally interviewed four candidates, making his final decision after meeting each of them once. For circuit and district judges, the president signed off on the final decision after the interview and vetting process was complete. But Trump and his team were in sync on what they wanted in the nominees: originalists and textualists, meaning they interpret laws based on what they say is the original intent of the Constitution's

Donald and Melania Trump posed with freshly confirmed Brett Kavanaugh, his wife, Ashley, and other Supreme Court justices in October 2018.

framers and based purely on the text, without considering shifting social values or paying much heed to legislative history. They also wanted judges who worry about regulations and what they saw as the increasing power of unelected bureaucrats, a phenomenon McGahn calls the administrative state.

Some of Trump's picks had a history of inflammatory statements or decisions that might have been disqualifying under the vetting procedures used by previous Republican administrations, according to Nan Aron, head of the liberal group Alliance for Justice. "The standards are so much lower now," she said. In fact, provocation was part of the point. In a rare public appearance—a speech before the Federalist Society in November 2017 at Washington's Mayflower Hotel—McGahn joked that his team would work with two lists of potential nominees. The first list contained "mainstream" and "pragmatic folks." The second list, he said, included judges who are "too hot for prime time. . . . The kind of people that make some people nervous.

"The first list we're going to throw in the trash," McGahn said to laughter and applause. "The second list, that's the one we're going to put before the U.S. Senate, because I know leader McConnell is going to get it done."

As promised, McConnell delivered, successfully confirming even appellate judges with polemical pasts. One judge, Leonard Steven Grasz, was confirmed to the Eighth Circuit in December 2017 despite writing in 1996 that the legacy of landmark abortion ruling Roe v. Wade

was "moral bankruptcy." Barrett, who was confirmed to the Seventh Circuit in October 2017 before being elevated to the Supreme Court, wrote in 1998 that Catholic trial judges should sometimes recuse themselves from capital-punishment cases. John Bush, confirmed to the Sixth Circuit in July 2017, used to blog about politics, spreading conspiracy theories and once comparing abortion to slavery. Liberal groups worked overtime to do their own research and pounced on what they unearthed. Alliance for Justice, for example, estimates that its team reviewed 67,680 pages of records as part of its vetting process in 2017.

The emphasis on speed produced a few embarrassing setbacks. Toward the end of 2017, the White House withdrew three divisive district judge nominees from consideration. Brett Talley, nominated for a district court in Alabama, came under fire for his lack of trial experience, objectionable blog posts and failure to disclose that he was married to McGahn's chief of staff. Jeff Mateer, nominated for a Texas district court, had said transgender children were evidence of "Satan's plan." And Matthew Petersen, nominated to the district court in the District of Columbia, withdrew after he struggled to answer even basic legal questions. Hammering these concerns in the hearings, said Blumenthal, was one of the only remaining points of leverage that he and other Democrats had on this issue: "There is at some point a shame level that the administration cannot surmount with some of these nominees," he said.

Democrats tried to gum up the confirmation process, in some cases refusing to return blue slips, a custom by which both home-state senators sign off on nominees. They also called for extra votes to extend debate time between committee hearings and final votes. But in the end, they had few tools to stop Republicans from confirming Trump's nominees, given that the filibuster had been eliminated.

Even though the system benefitted Republicans at the time, conservatives worry that doing away with blue slips and filibusters will inflict long-term damage on the Senate, reducing its power relative to the Executive Branch. "I wish I could tell you yes, it can happen in my lifetime," Republican judiciary chairman Grassley said in 2018 of returning to more bipartisan cooperation on judicial confirmations. "But I'm 84 years old. I don't expect it to happen."

Federal judges are supposed to be above politics. Once they emerge from a bruising confirmation process and don their black robes, the lifetime appointment purportedly protects them from the pressures and partisan transactions that plague the other two branches of government. But that has always been something of a fairy tale. Even early in Trump's presidency, judges from all points on the ideological spectrum had to wade directly into politically charged issues, ruling on Trump's crackdown on sanctuary cities and iterations of his travel ban. "We have seen extraordinary levels of judicial activism in cases being decided not based on the law, but based on the judge's view of the president," said Severino.

EACH NOMINATION, EACH CONFIRMATION AND EACH OPINION ADD UP TO A JUDICIAL LEGACY THAT WILL EXPRESS ITSELF FOR DECADES TO COME.

TRUMP HIMSELF CONTRIBUTED to the increasing public perception of judicial partisanship. During his 2016 campaign, he attacked a Mexican American judge, saying his Hispanic heritage made him "hostile" to Trump's position. In early 2017, he criticized a "so-called judge" who had halted his travel ban. (That prompted Gorsuch, then still awaiting confirmation to the Supreme Court, to call the president's attacks on the judiciary "disheartening" and "demoralizing.") Trump "is not somebody who cares deeply about a fair and independent justice system," said Daniel Goldberg, legal director at Alliance for Justice.

Reaction to the impact Trump's judges will have often splits along party lines. Nearly 70 percent of

Trump nominated Amy Coney Barrett to replace Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who died in September 2020.

Americans said they had faith in the Judicial Branch in a 2017 survey, according to Gallup, more than either of the other two branches of government. But one year into that first term, Democrats had become less trusting of the courts than they had been while Republican faith in the system surged during Trump's first year, from 48 percent toward the end of the Obama era to 79 pecent in late 2017. For Republicans, Trump's judges offered a reassuring check on government overreach and strong support of free speech, gun rights and religious freedom issues. For Democrats, the judges' focus on original intent and pure text of laws threatened to "turn the clock back," said Alliance for Justice's Aron, on issues such as workplace protections, LGBT rights and environmental regulations.

That quickly become a reality for Joseph Morrissey, who in the fall of 2017 lost a case before Kevin Newsom, a Trump-appointed judge on the 11th Circuit. Morrissey and his husband sued the IRS after they were denied a tax deduction for reproductive expenses when they had a child through in vitro fertilization. The 11th Circuit case was heard in Montgomery, Alabama, that August. Morrissey, a law professor at Stetson University, remembered visiting civil rights museums in the city before heading to court. "There was a real dedication to acknowledging the abuses of the past and remedying them," Morrissey said. "I was encouraged by the things I was reading and the things I was seeing at the memorials and the museums, only to have my hopes dashed."

Sitting in the courtroom, Morrissey said, he began to feel defeated. A month later, he got the news: Newsom ruled that IVF procedures weren't related to Morrissey's "own reproductive function," so he wasn't eligible to claim the deduction. "That's what we need," Morrissey quipped during a phone interview conducted from the backseat of a minivan beside his two young kids. "A socially conservative white man in Alabama who is going to really help carry on the legacy of civil rights."

The sarcasm revealed a simple truth about judges' power. Each nomination, each confirmation and each opinion add up to a judicial legacy that will express itself in decades to come. That's the lodestar for those working on judges amid the chaos of the Trump administration: the higher mission to shape American society beyond any one policy or decision, and beyond any one president. ▯

A STINGING LOSS ENDS THE FIRST TERM

His handling of the pandemic, a divisive leadership style and a dubious choice of campaign manager contributed to Trump's narrow defeat in 2020.

BY BRIAN BENNETT AND TESSA BERENSON ROGERS

IT ALL FINALLY CAUGHT UP TO HIM. THE lies, the outrageous boasts, the disorder and disastrous management, the rants and the race-baiting, the predatory instincts and compulsion to dominate—all the things that made President Donald Trump the ringmaster of the American political circus at last compelled a majority of voters to drive him out of the tent on November 7, 2020.

Few other presidents in modern history so inflamed the nation or exposed the cracks in our democracy as did Trump. In the end, his pride didn't just precede his fall; it precipitated it. Until the final months of his 2020 run, Trump's campaign was managed by a novice who burned through millions of dollars. Trump thought he could wish away a deadly virus. He dismissed his legions of critics, preferring to bask in the adulation of fans. He governed as president of his base only, and he ran for reelection without pivoting toward the center. He barely articulated a policy vision for a second term. He campaigned hard, but in the end, the first Trump presidency ended much as it began: with a thin margin in key states separating two candidates in an anxious nation, and Trump appealing to America's demons over its better angels, hurling baseless claims that he'd been robbed.

Trump's presidency was marked by scandals and controversies as varied as they were alarming. He refused to face the roots of the country's racial disparities and doubled down on a message of white grievance. One of the dominant political trends of his tenure was the exodus of suburbanites, white women, college-educated voters and independents from the Republican Party.

His prospects for reelection were dragged down by a pandemic that exposed his weaknesses along with ours. Chief among them was his reckless approach to a virus that landed him in the hospital at the peak of the campaign. "If the president never gets COVID, he wins the election. Our polling showed a significant dip when that happened, particularly with suburban, college-educated, non-liberal men," said GOP strategist Brad Todd. "Trump getting COVID sent a signal to those people that his management style had consequences even for him personally and was therefore unlikely to change."

Presidents' legacies are formed in the crucible of great challenges. When COVID-19 hit, Trump pulled open the tears in our national fabric even

Trump campaigned in Pennsylvania, which along with Michigan and Wisconsin flipped from red to blue in 2020.

wider. Just before Election Day 2020, as the U.S. suffered a big spike in cases, Trump mocked the virus as a media conspiracy. "Fake News Media is going full on Covid, Covid, Covid," he tweeted on October 27. "We are rounding the turn."

The voters knew better. Over the course of an extraordinary election year, more than 235,000 Americans died and more than 9 million were infected. The crisis called for a president who could be tough and empathetic, put forth concrete plans to deal with it and mourn with American families who had lost loved ones in lonely hospital rooms.

Trump was defeated because of his "failure to connect on the thing that voters most cared about, which was coronavirus," said Sarah Longwell, founder of Republican Voters Against Trump (RVAT). While legions lost jobs, closed businesses, refrained from hugging their aging parents and homeschooled their children, "what Trump did was decide to pretend like coronavirus wasn't the most dominant thing in people's lives," Longwell said. His blithe dismissals may have turned off seniors, a core component of his fragile coalition particularly susceptible to the virus: He lost 4 points among this age group compared to his 2016 performance, according to CNN exit polls on November 7.

Even in defeat, the outgoing occupant of the White House won millions more votes than he had four years prior. It was hardly an abject repudiation. But in the end, a majority of America's voters made the choice to move on.

One key mistake of Trump's reelection bid came in February 2018, when he hired Brad Parscale as his campaign manager. A digital guru, Parscale ran a social media advertising blitz on Facebook that helped Trump win in 2016. But Parscale was also a political novice who had never managed a campaign, let alone one for an incumbent president with a perilously narrow path to reelection. Parscale spent lavishly, burning through hundreds of millions of dollars and frittering away a sizable cash advantage. When former New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg bought a Super Bowl ad to promote his own short-lived presidential campaign, the president's team shelled out $10 million for Trump's own.

"Brad had never run any campaign before," said Mike DuHaime, a veteran Republican strategist, and "to suddenly put him in charge of a billion-dollar operation I think is unfair and a bad decision." By July 2020, Trump had replaced Parscale with deputy campaign manager Bill Stepien. Unflashy and data-driven, Stepien set about controlling the campaign budget and cutting television spending and travel expenses. But former vice president Joe Biden's massive cash lead hamstrung Trump's efforts to close the gap down the stretch.

The bigger problem was Stepien's client. Trump lost the national popular vote by nearly 3 million in 2016 but never attempted to expand his support beyond his hardcore base. Instead he tried to find new voters—most of them non-college-educated white men—who were attracted to his divisive, often racially inflammatory style. He lost the popular vote by a significantly wider margin after making a series of unforced errors that eroded his support in what became decisive states. Biden flipped Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, the three states that delivered Trump the presidency in 2016. Trump lost Arizona after feuding with the state's favorite son, the late Republican senator John McCain. He lost Georgia because of strong Democratic turnout around Atlanta in the district formerly represented by the late congressman John Lewis, whose civil-rights legacy Trump dismissed.

Amid a nationwide uprising over systemic racism, Trump denied the underlying issues. He never attempted to unite the country or speak to its shared pain. On June 5, less than two weeks after the killing of George Floyd and with the nation gripped by Black Lives Matter protests, Trump held a rambling press conference in which he touted a strong jobs report. "Hopefully George is looking down right now and saying this is a great thing that's happening for our country," Trump said. "This is a great day for him. It's a great day for everybody." Polls showed that a majority of voters disapproved of Trump's handling of the protests, and it cut into his support among white voters who had lifted him to victory the last time.

By midsummer, when Americans had been living circumscribed, fearful lives for months, many of the voters who had supported Trump in 2016 had soured on his leadership. "It's a 'don't care' attitude," a woman in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, said in a focus group hosted by RVAT in July, which TIME observed. "This is a time in crisis. You're supposed to be with us. And I can't see it."

At the start of 2020, Trump's advisers saw the economy as his best argument for reelection. When it cratered because of the coronavirus, his campaign tried to paint him as the best person to bring the

The Trumps on election night in 2020, when the vote count was still continuing.

economy back. "The coronavirus ended the economic sugar rush," said Timothy Naftali, a historian at New York University. "That was his undoing."

In any case, Trump didn't stick to the script. His closing campaign argument was a litany of grievances—against the media, against Dr. Anthony Fauci, against the phantom "fraud" of mail-in voting, against the hard reality of increasing COVID-19 case counts. He refused to see the writing on the wall in the final days of the vote count, dangerously spreading unfounded allegations of widespread voter fraud and baselessly claiming that Democrats had tried to "steal" the election.

What voters heard was a candidate focused on his own problems, not theirs. As Election Day approached, Trump turned to the vast federal apparatus to save him. He conscripted federal agencies as foot soldiers in his campaign, pressuring the Food and Drug Administration and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to alter their COVID-19 recommendations in his effort to downplay the pandemic. He leaned on the Justice Department to help his allies and investigate his political foes. Starting in July, his postmaster general, Louis DeJoy, implemented sweeping changes that slowed delivery just as millions of voters were casting ballots by mail. Trump used federal agents to clear racial-justice protesters from Lafayette Square in Washington, D.C., confront protests in Portland and deploy to "Democrat-run" cities to paint a portrait of anarchy. "Trump regularly wanted to use our law-enforcement authorities in a way that he thought would be politically beneficial to him and especially damaging blue states and cities," said Miles Taylor, former chief of staff at the Department of Homeland Security, the author of an anonymous 2018 *New York Times* op-ed that castigated Trump's leadership.

These failures made Trump the one thing he was raised to fear most: a loser. "Losing is never easy," Trump mused at his campaign headquarters on Election Day. "Not for me, it's not." For a man who has craved praise above all else, being the first president in nearly 30 years to be cast aside after a single term was surely a difficult blow. ☐

—With reporting by Molly Ball, Mariah Espada, and Abby Vesoulis

The Big Lie About January 6

★★★★★

Trump didn't just paper over the truth about the storming of the Capitol—he turned it into a rallying point.

BY ERIC CORTELLESSA

For millions of Americans, January 6, 2021, was a jarring day that ended their nation's 150-year streak of peaceful transitions of power.

For Donald Trump, it was a windfall.

Ever since his supporters stormed the Capitol as Joe Biden's victory was being certified, Trump has continued to falsely insist he won in 2020 and paint the unrest as the result of a stolen election. In December 2021, Trump said that the real insurrection "took place on November 3," recasting the violence that left five dead as an "unarmed protest of the rigged election."

It proved to be a potent—and lucrative—lie. Nearly half of Republicans believe Trump won in 2020, according to a poll taken in January 2022. For months, fundraising emails from Trump claiming the 2020 election was "rigged and stolen" pointed readers to a bright red button that read DONATE TO SAVE AMERICA. Trump's political machine raked in at least $50 million in the six months that followed the January 6 Capitol riot, according to filings with the Federal Election Commission, an unusually high figure for a defeated former president during his first year out of office—and nearly eight times what Trump raised in outside funding while seeking the GOP nomination in 2015.

The fallout from January 6 also allowed the former president to strengthen his grip on the Republican Party. Lawmakers' reactions to the attack have become a personal loyalty test: At least six Republicans who criticized the rioters were targeted for primary challenges by candidates loyal to Trump. Members of Congress who supported the House investigation into the attempted insurrection were featured in critical ads by pro-Trump groups. "Sometimes there are consequences to being ineffective and weak," Trump said of the "wayward Republicans" who voted for the congressional probe to move forward. (Trump's office did not respond to requests for comment.)

Trump and his allies did more than paper over the events of the day. They used it as a rallying cry to raise the specter of more violence if future voting didn't go Trump's way. Asked by ABC News's Jonathan Karl in a March 2021 interview about the individuals who breached the Capitol and threatened Vice President Mike Pence's life over his decision to uphold the legitimate election results, Trump backed his supporters: "Well, the people were very angry."

There appeared to be reason to hope, in the raw immediate aftermath of January 6, that the spectacle of political violence in the halls of Congress might spur a national course correction. That didn't happen. Instead, disinformation about alleged election fraud was mainstreamed as a plank of both the Republican Party's political strategy and Trump's 2024 run. While most major GOP advertisers stayed away from highlighting the January 6 insurrection in their ads, Republicans routinely used myths around election fraud as a central message in their funding drives and efforts to collect contact information from supporters, according to analysis of Republican political-ad spending by Bully Pulpit Interactive, a left-leaning digital-advertising firm.

From July 2021 to January 2022, the pro-Trump Save America Joint Fundraising Committee, which brought in more than $20 million in the first half of 2021, spent more than $1 million on Facebook advertising. One ad asked, IS TRUMP THE TRUE PRESIDENT? Those who clicked "Answer Now" were sent to a fundraising page and asked for their email address.

The strategy didn't just rake in money. According to an NPR/Ispos poll released on January 3, 2022, 45 percent of Republicans believed there was major fraudulent voting that changed the result of the election. Nearly one-third of Republicans polled believed the storming of the Capitol on January 6 was carried out by groups from the far-left "antifa" movement or government agents, a conspiracy theory propagated early on by right-wing media outlets, and 38 percent of Republicans described January 6 as a "riot that got out of control" rather than an attempt to overturn an election.

Among all Americans polled, 64 percent agreed that American democracy was in crisis and at risk of failing. That sense of alarm boosted Trump's power, said Larry Sabato, a political analyst and director of the Center for Politics at the University of Virginia. "January 6 has increased his rank and file's anger and resentment," Sabato said. "It's confirmation for them that everybody else is out to get them."

As Trump and his allies used January 6 to raise money and woo voters, they also leveraged it to weed out GOP members critical of Trump's actions that day. After U.S. Rep. Peter Meijer of Michigan voted to impeach Trump for trying to overturn the election result and staying silent for hours while his supporters violently laid siege to the Capitol, Trump called him a "RINO" (Republican in name only)

A third of Republicans have bought into conspiracy theories about the January 6 assault on the Capitol.

and endorsed a primary challenger. Trump also endorsed a challenger against Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler of Washington state, who voted in favor of his second impeachment and said Trump encouraged "would-be assassins" with his remarks at a rally before the attack. (Trump was acquitted by the Senate in the impeachment trial.)

Groups supporting the former president joined in the fight. When 35 House Republicans voted in May 2021 to form a commission investigating the riot, a pro-Trump super PAC stepped in. Drain the DC Swamp, registered in Marlton, New Jersey, spent more than $210,000 for 13 ads on Facebook and Instagram in a two-week blitz, labeling the GOP lawmakers "communist traitors" and "turncoats." The campaign, which continued through mid-July, appeared in Americans' Facebook and Instagram feeds more than 6.7 million times.

After Rep. Nancy Mace, a Republican from South Carolina, voted on October 21 in favor of holding former Trump adviser Steve Bannon in contempt of Congress for failing to cooperate with the House investigation into January 6, Drain the DC Swamp again went on a spending spree. On December 13, the group dropped at least $14,000 for five different ads on Facebook and Instagram calling Mace "anti-Trump" and "a disgrace." The ads appeared more than 450,000 times, reaching an audience largely over the age of 55, per the Facebook Ad Library.

The events of January 6 were "being used as a resource for Trump," said Amy Fried, a political-science professor at the University of Maine, "to raise funds, to keep himself front and center, to bind himself with loyalty to his supporters." Fried, who coauthored the book *At War with Government: How Conservatives Weaponized Distrust from Goldwater to Trump,* saw this as an escalation of a decades-long tendency by Republican politicians to undermine the public's faith in government.

That erosion is hard to reverse. "We can never take the American system for granted," said Sabato. "We're just as vulnerable as most other societies—most other democracies—to deterioration in our standards and values." Even today, there's every reason to fear that the violence of January 6 may have not marked the end of the nation's political degradation but its acceleration.

—With reporting by Julia Zorthian

What a Second Term Will Look Like

★★★★★

Donald Trump spoke to TIME about what he intends to do when he returns to the White House.

BY ERIC CORTELLESSA

In April 2024, Donald Trump sat down at Mar-a-Lago for a lengthy talk about what he would do in a second term. Here are selections from that interview, condensed for space.

Asked about a possible repeal of the 22nd Amendment, Trump said he would serve one term, "and then I'm gonna leave."

TIME: Let's start with day one: January 20, 2025. You have said that you will take a suite of aggressive actions on the border and on immigration—
Donald Trump: Yes. And on energy.
You have talked about a massive deportation operation. What's your plan, sir?
We will be using local law enforcement.
Does that include using the U.S. military?
It would. When we talk military, generally speaking, I talk National Guard.
You would use the military inland as well as at the border?
I don't think I'd have to do that. I think the National Guard would be able to do that. If they weren't able to, then I'd use the military.
Sir, the Posse Comitatus Act says that you can't deploy the U.S. military against civilians. Would you override that?
Well, these aren't civilians. These are people that aren't legally in our country.
How are you going to get state and local police departments to participate in this?
Well, there's a possibility that some won't want to participate, and they won't partake in the riches. We have to do this.
You have floated a 10 percent tariff on all imports, and a more than 60 percent tariff on Chinese imports. Most economists say that tariffs increase prices. Are you comfortable with additional inflation?
I don't believe it'll be inflation. I think it'll be lack of loss for our country.
Will you veto any bill that imposes any federal restrictions on abortions?
You don't need a federal ban. Roe v. Wade was all about—it wasn't about abortion so much as bringing it back to the states. So the states would negotiate deals.
You have called the men and women who have been prosecuted for their actions on January 6 "hostages" and "political prisoners." Will you consider pardoning every one of them?
I would consider that, yes. If somebody was evil and bad, I would look at that differently. But many of those people went in, many of those people were ushered in.
Would you continue to provide military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine?
I'm going to try and help Ukraine, but Europe has to get there also and do their job. Europe is not paying their fair share.
You said you only want to be dictator for a day. What did you mean by that?
That was said sarcastically, as a joke, on Sean Hannity. He said, "Do you want to be a dictator?" I said, "Only for one day. I want to close up the border and I want to drill, baby, drill." Then I said, "After that, then I never want to be a dictator."
Would you definitely retire after a second term, or would you consider challenging the 22nd Amendment?
I'm going to serve one term, I'm gonna do a great job. We're gonna have a very successful country again. And then I'm gonna leave.

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DONALD TRUMP

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At a rally on Long Island, New York, a fan looked forward to the 45th president soon becoming the 47th.

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THE FIRST COUPLE, AGAIN

★★★★★

On the morning of November 5, Donald and Melania voted together in Palm Beach, and that night they celebrated the happy returns. In his victory speech early on November 6, he called his wife on stage for a kiss and said, “She works very hard to help people, so I just want to thank her.”

NOVEMBER 6, 2024

In the early morning hours, with a convincing win assured, Donald Trump took to the stage at his Palm Beach headquarters. "This is a movement like no one has seen before," he said. Those on stage with Trump included (left to right): Tiffany Trump, Kimberly Guilfoyle, Donald Trump Jr., Kai Trump, Donald Trump III, Dana White, Eric Trump, Lara Trump, Melania Trump, Barron Trump, Viktor Knavs (Melania's father), Usha Vance, JD Vance, Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner.